

Of Sins & Winter



Maurice
Rowdon

OF SINS AND WINTER

By the same author

HILIBORL THE CLOWN



Maurice Rowdon

OF SINS AND
WINTER

CHATTO & WINDUS

LONDON

CONTENTS

Part One	<i>page</i> 1
Part Two	33
Part Three	73
Part Four	127
Part Five	167

Part I

IT is extraordinary to me that I should be in what was once the Enemy's country, and that I am to live behind the Enemy's lines. On the way up to the house I looked again and again at a notice before me, near an opening in the fir-wood: DURCHGANG VERBOTEN. On the train I looked secretly at the tiny warning above the window, *Nicht Hinauslehnen*, and I was excited. I listened closely whenever the other people in the compartment spoke.

The day is May 3 hot and quite cloudless. The last part of my climb up here was very steep, by the side of a long ravine. I went ahead of the boy and turned to see whether the town of Bleitnau would be visible from the farmhouse. But it was hidden behind trees, and I felt happier because of this. Bleitnau was a silent and desolate town, though I did not notice any ruins; it lay sadly by the iron-grey waters of the Salzach, a place of mute warehouses, wood-yards and barracks. The sun did nothing to alter its sadness, but filled the narrow main street with an unbearable hot torpor.

I waited for the boy to reach me, then told him to go into the kitchen and warn them of my arrival.

In front of the farmhouse there is a sloping lawn, a cherry tree in blossom and a wooden Christ, utterly still in the afternoon sunlight. The moment I turned

OF SINS AND WINTER

the corner from the deep ravine, with the child going in front of me, I recognised this slope. I stopped suddenly on the narrow path and looked up in breathless relief and wonder, just as if I were coming back to a place I had once known very well. Bleitnau I hated. But here a field went steeply up before me and at the top were a wooden black fence, a broken farm-gate, a cherry tree, and then, shining behind the leaves, a white and yellow farmhouse with a wooden balcony. It was familiar to me, and just what I had been hoping for. Everything is warm and enclosed, rather muted, on this freak summer's day.

The long kitchen is dark, stitling and untidy, with flies everywhere. I went straight across to the oldest woman, Frau Glassner, and shook hands with her. She is a tiny woman dressed in black, with a dry, wrinkled face and long hands stiffened and swollen at the knuckles with rheumatism. She watched me carefully as I sat down, and whenever I looked up at her she smiled quickly, her eyes sharp and small. All the time she was trying to divine me, not as the others were doing; by looking at my clothes, but by looking straight into my eyes.

There was a scrubbed wooden table at the side of my bench, and here she put down a jug of milk and a glass for me. I took off my shoes and stretched out my legs, still sweating from the climb, and behind me, through a window just by my shoulder, I could see the bright and enchanted slope. Beyond it was the fir-wood.

On a bench close to the wall there were two youths and an old man, all of them staring at me as I drank my milk. The old man never spoke, but leaned on

PART ONE

his stick, tired from the fields, a thing of work now, his eyes bloodshot and watery, his skin mottled. There was a great noise in the kitchen while Frau Glassner tried to talk to me. The wireless cracked and boomed, a child on the floor made the dogs bark, chickens and kid-goats came in from the cobbled yard and were at once shoo-d out again.

When we had agreed on a price for my room, she asked me how long I would stay. She seemed puzzled when I told her a week, or perhaps a fortnight, even a month. How can I explain to them that I am here in the hope that they will yield me a key, and that when the secret has been revealed to me I shall continue my journey?

Already I am beginning to recollect the past, shaping it from this place.

I remember climbing a green slope so steep that I had to lean flat against the horse's back, with my head down so as to avoid his neck as it jerked back furiously in the effort of the climb. Sometimes, when I was feeding him sugar from my hand, he would suddenly push his nose against my chest in affection and almost send me flying. He was a heavy, rather lazy creature with a fine black coat, and had belonged, not many weeks before, to a Cossack soldier.

At the top, among the trees, where the frost was still visible in the grass of the sloping lawn, I remember jumping down and tying the reins to a post. It was a last slope to just such a farmhouse as this in Bleitnau, with just such an enchanted lawn, and black, still fences and wooden gates.

OF SINS AND WINTER

I remember looking in at the windows and seeing no one. So I went round to the back, across the mud near the barn which was frozen hard, and looked in at the dark entrances of the out-houses. But there was no one. I looked farther up the slope and saw one of the workers in a ploughed field wave down to me. I waved back, then decided to return to my horse. I was hungry, and the tips of my fingers were stiff with the cold. It was an hour after dawn, with a very yellow, clear sun, on one of the first cold days of autumn. This farmhouse was in Carinthia, near the Yugoslav border. I had intended to ask the owner if I might have a room there, but then it struck me as ridiculous, and I went back to my horse.

I returned across a great valley of fir-trees. It was quite dark in the woods, and colder, with grey snow here and there along the hard, black path and among the leaves on either side. At an opening I turned and looked out across a vast hollow of gold and reddening leaves, sprayed forth in a gush of colour as far as I could see.

I used to take this ride every morning soon after dawn, and I would be back in time for breakfast. I was always intending to ask for a room in that enchanted farmhouse, a room where I would drink and sleep, far from the camp, in an effort to shake off my sense of exile. I wished that the farm-people would stable my horse and cook for me, and at dawn the following day I would be back in the camp before anyone had noticed my absence. This was a dream I never realised.

Yet now I was powerful enough to realise it. It was the autumn of and I was a victor.

PART ONE

In these first few weeks of peace I used to sit in a field by the camp and watch the girls talking to their father or turning the hay. For time was now mine, and the future. The War was over.

I listened carefully when one of the captains told me, in a low voice, sitting in a bivouac after dusk, how he had taken a patrol to a farmhouse in the hills and how two women had been there, how one of them had taken him down to the dark cellar and told him breathlessly that she had not been touched by a man for two years, that she was like other women, that she could no longer bear this life, and how he had promised to go back one evening and stay the whole night. I listened carefully because she gave him the chance of belonging somewhere, of being needed. She might heal a man of his exile.

Just now I walked out into the muddy cobbled yard and across to the cattle-house below my bedroom window. I came to a dark passage-way where there was a cart with its shafts up and a he-goat watching me in the shadows, and inside the cattle-house I saw three mother-goats and their young leaping up to suckle, their tails wagging fast.

It was a heavy, warm, wet smell. I saw the cobwebs over the windows and in the darkness two horses. One of the chains harnessing the cows clinked, a horse stamped and shifted with a sigh, a cow turned slowly to look at me.

It was the smell of terror. I remember a man who groaned one whole day and night. He lay in the stall of a cattle-house near Faenza. He cried out again and

OF SINS AND WINTER

again to be taken further into the house, again and again he cried out, but it was not the time for wounded men, it was not their time of blessing.

And near him lay two dead men with their arms held stiffly up towards the ceiling in dumb eternal supplication. Soldiers had dragged them out of the house by the hands, and their arms had not fallen back.

I first joined my regiment at the beaches of Salerno, south of Naples, during the evening of the night when the English and American forces were almost driven back into the sea. The captain who welcomed me was a modest, pleasant man, but at that time a victim of battle-snobbery. I mean by this that he merely shook hands with me and turned away, as if to say, We are not here to make polite exchanges; you must realise without delay that while you have been idling in a North African port or kicking your heels in a home station, we here have been risking our lives, working day and night, and suffering the cries of wounded men. When he looked me in the eyes he passed me a silent message: *Put away your childhood.*

In the groves of Salerno I learned that war was a highly serious matter. These men were as serious as monks. They listened to the yells of wounded men like novitiates walking in cloisters, with heads bowed. They were rather haughty with me. They told me not to be foolhardy when I remained standing during a bombardment (not knowing the significance of the songs in the sky and the black fountains of earth), and they laughed at me for cowardice when, to oblige them, I went to ground at the slightest noise. Even

PART ONE

the grimy gunners looked like chosen men who had seen Visions and heard Voices. In this holy war there seemed to be no sharpening of knives in the darkness, no dirty licence, no sudden murderous rush forward, no leader who jumped to his feet and persuaded his men to come into death.

Only in the very forward lines, when darkness surrounded everything, when men were alone and terrible again, when their democracy slipped from them like a ghostly mantle, was there sometimes a cry for blood, and then, two hours later, surprise at Staff. But back at the guns, everything was clean, ordered and thoroughly intellectual. We live at the beck and call of scholars. Even in war the hegemony is not shaken off.

I would hear them after nightfall, promising to wipe that smile off my face with a really serious assignment up in front. As soon as there was a ticklish river to cross, and a lot of blood to be mingled with it, my name would be the first on the list. This was how the scholars planned to make me "battle-worthy". On the whole, they succeeded, and I too learned how to go into battle like a scholar. A peg of rum for courage, or a benzedrine tablet, would have been fatal to me: they would have destroyed that clarity of mind necessary for activities like writing a thesis or planning abstract murder. And after abstract murder there came that feeling of purity, of having done a sound work of scholarship.

During my training as a novice at Salerno, I saw my first artillery barrage. When the German wedge was broken, the English infantry moved north along the Naples road, towards Cava dei Tirreni, and my

OF SINS AND WINTER

regiment moved away from the beach into the hilly meadows, fresh and green, with secret clumps of trees and pebbly streams, above Salerno, out of sight from the sea except at the crest of each hill.

Everything was close-packed, bursting, plump and very green. On the first day, when all the front was quiet, I went down to one of the streams, twisting and falling through a little wood, very cool and an age away from the guns, though they were only a few yards higher up, and washed myself all over, standing naked in the middle. In these first few days, having not yet been chosen for a forward assignment, I came to the conclusion that the War was an easy matter, a matter for the mind alone.

I had seen many photographs of brown-faced soldiers in North Africa and deduced from them a fairly safe war in which machines would do most of the work, abstractly. I put away the nightmares of my childhood about muddy trenches and the endless decimation of men. I felt easy in these meadows.

So I bathed, strolled through the woods, read a book from my little library, lay on my camp-bed, slept, joked with the bombardiers, and chewed grass outside the command post very complacently. Several times during the day I walked down to the barn where a headquarters had been established. I simply stood outside watching the pigeons on the roof, the cows near the entrance and the Italian family coming and going. I loved these barns, the slush at their entrances, the smells inside, their warmth, the tumbled-in roofs, the piles of hay, the sighing of animals and the occasional resigned stamping of a hoof on the barn-floor, and the quiet shifting of great flanks.

PART ONE

But it was a silence before the attack, a silence with which I was not yet familiar. I knew that there were plans for a barrage that same evening, but I did not know the extent of this barrage. I only knew about it in so far as it affected the twenty-four guns of my regiment.

When evening came I wandered back to the command post, and the captain told me sharply to stand by for any emergency task that might fall to me during the barrage. I nodded, with my hands in my pockets, and the signallers in the command post were silent as he spoke, solemn like judges, as if they themselves had just been vindicated. Everything was ready. The shells and cartridge-cases lay in great piles behind the gun-emplacements, and the first shift of men was going on.

It was utterly dark and silent outside when the captain gave the order to the guns, "Take post!" five minutes before the barrage was due to begin. I was still bored and complacent, expecting little. A runner came in with a written message, to say that the infantry were on their start-line. They would be waiting in the dark, crouched in the ditches, listening for the first shells to make protective arcs above their heads. The captain turned in the dim light of the command post and looked at me.

"Go outside and stand behind the guns," he said. "Be ready to transmit my orders if the loudspeakers break down."

I lifted the flap of the tent and walked through the darkness a few yards in the direction of the guns. I brought a little megaphone with me, to help my voice should I have to shout, and I noticed that one of the

OF SINS AND WINTER

signallers smiled at this as I went out of the tent, as if it were only another sign of my being a novice.

I heard the first faint order, "Fire!" from another field far to a flank, then the order was instantly taken up again and again until it came from the loud-speakers of the command post beside me; and in one swift movement the dark, starlit night moved and a great booming and crashing sounded long into space, swelling like a slow, fathomless burst along the entire front, and I started, my mouth open, amazed at the great blue and yellow flashes meeting across the sky, and the earth in front of me leaping and rumbling with the detonations. All the night was rocking and flashing and booming, and I stood before the illuminated tent astonished at what had been let loose, for this was the whole great harbour drenched in a dome of deafening sound, gone mad in a last thunder of the universe.

But then my horror gave place to a strange, willing exultation, and I joined the madness, I became wild with it and let myself go. I stood in the shaking, flashing dome, my eyes blazing, inspired by this last hour of the universe, for it must be the last. God must take notice. Yes, there must even be, at this eleventh hour, a God to take notice.

The men in front of me were pushing the shells home with their ram-rods, thrusting closed the steel doors of the breech, standing back for the mighty spout to recoil and give forth its burst; and the flash lit up the shy meadow and the tent behind. Now I wanted to join in. My novitiate's first complacency had fallen through, and I was itching to be at one of the guns, pulling the hot lever with a lanyard after

PART ONE

the sergeant's order, "Fire!", running back to get ammunition, pushing the thin-nosed missiles home in the breech with a ram-rod. The War had won me. It had done its work of inspiration, and I was now its happy child, my chin pushed forward, out to do a man's job, at last knowing that this dome of fire would stomach no children. I knew my place at last, and the first catechism had been said and learned. I was puffed up with war. My mind was huge with it. I was now its cunning scholar, doing all the right genuflections and signs of the cross and profound homages. The others were solemn like monks—all the men at the guns and the signallers in the command post--and now I had joined them, bursting with metaphysics. I stood staring beyond the guns into the sky above Naples, chosen at last, and alone with my vision. This was my first lesson: the pomp and thunder of war, promising glory.

But at Cava dei Tirreni, a few miles to the north and three days later, I was to receive my true baptism, by no means a baptism of fire.

I have begun to visit the dark kitchen downstairs more often, and to stay there talking to Frau Glassner and her daughter. The first brilliant summer's day did not repeat itself.

I am fascinated by my conversations with the Enemy. We talk about the price of food and clothing in Austria, about Frau Glassner's five cows, about the age of her dog, kept for her son's return from eternity, about the costliness of her two new piglets, about the excellence of goat-milk for babies, about

OF SINS AND WINTER

the neighbouring town where she was born, about town-girls who paint their cheeks before a dance, about the War, about murder by night in the whispering fir-woods (how the girl screamed and the people in the ski-hotel nearby thought it was laughter), about the snow in the mountains, its sudden drifts, removing villages and forests, about her long illness, and about church-going, obsequious people. We sit leaning on the table, talking quietly to each other. We eye each other with suspicion, then we smile when we catch the other's glance. Both of us know that something is withheld. We understand each other like conspirators.

When she wants Theresa, her youngest daughter, a tom-boy with black, curly hair, to do something for her in the kitchen she speaks harshly, with a quick, guttural utterance. Her eyes are wild and black when she shouts, and the child jumps as if a whip has just been cracked.

Frau Glassner's face never sleeps. It is wrinkled, grey, and her lips are very thin, the tiniest blue thread across her face.

When she talks about money her mouth changes. It draws down sadly at the edges, and her eyes seem to become smaller. Her face takes on a humble despair. Sometimes she fetches a black scarf and wraps it round her head, then huddles herself on the bench, as if she were afraid of something. In that movement she makes the world too huge, grey and resolutely cruel. Her husband died after wounds, in the First World War. He came back from the front, and she nursed him down to his silly grave.

She eats little, she never leaves the farmhouse, and

PART ONE

she never touches *schnapps*. Her desires are dead. Her wrists give her a lot of pain, especially in wet weather, and she holds them in front of a blue ray-treatment lamp before she goes to bed each night. I came into the kitchen this morning and saw her sitting on the bench by the wall frowning and holding her wrist, alone and older than the trees. What key can she yield me to the Enemy? What of the Enemy can I find in her? She is a woman, like others. Yet I continue to stare, fascinated.

She told me this morning that her son had been lost on the Eastern front. The military people in Germany had written to her saying that there was no trace of him in any of the camps. She wrote letters about him to England, America, Russia and Poland. Perhaps he was still in Russia. Perhaps he would come back. She was keeping his dog, though it was really too old to live. The boy might one day step into the doorway. She stood near to me as she spoke, tiny and watchful, looking into my eyes for signs of her son's return.

"He never went to Bleitnau drinking," she said.

Did I see him upturned on a hand-cart, his head close to the gravel of the path, his feet pointing towards the church-steeple? Did I come across him suddenly, under my feet in the dark, a sudden presence? Did I see him swollen by a ditch? Her words did not move me in the slightest, because I knew too much. But I kept nodding my head in sympathy, just as I have always done on countless occasions in Italy, Greece and other parts of Austria, listening to the same monologue, the same terrible rune coming out of the earth.

OF SINS AND WINTER

It is raining and the clouds are lying low in the valley between the branches of the trees. The movements of soldiers and vehicles are slower in rain and mud, and moreover soldiers' spirits are lower, so that it is advantageous to shell heavily. The shells make a splash as they fall, swinging down suddenly from the sky. Let me die by summer! I remember that during the crossing of the River Volturno several men walked away from the line in horror and disgust. One of them was a young musician. He stared at things and shook his head with a smile, saying, "No, I am sorry, I am sorry."

Yesterday I walked over the hill into the other valley through a wood of fir-trees and past a flat, pink ski-hotel. The other valley was silent, dark and very cold. There was still snow on the peaks and among the foot-hills below me. A slight mountain-wind blew, and behind me there was swampy grass where the snow had recently thawed. I hate these mountains. Everything was deserted, and I could hear no sounds from the town below.

Just as I was beginning my descent and Bleitnau came in sight, I heard voices behind me. I turned round at once. It was sudden, like a revelation. They were soldiers, a platoon of American infantry. They were coming down the hill in single file and some of them were talking in low voices. I stopped to let them pass. I looked at their helmets, at the thin daggers sheathed in their belts, at their quick-firing guns, at their sunburned necks. And I was astonished to discover that I was trembling violently.

I had noticed one of these soldiers in particular. His was the face of a man exiled from love. It was

PART ONE

flushed with shame. I remember the photograph of myself which was taken immediately after the War. I remember the eyes, appealing for mercy like a dog's.

I know that I am in this country for one purpose alone: to make my exploration through a war. It is so strange, I do not know where I am being led; I am only aware of this weight on my shoulders.

My baptism took place in September, 1943. There were mossy statues among trees, and a terraced garden above. Also there were green garden-benches, and a fountain. Everything was deep green in the great terraced hollow, dark and enclosed. This was the fatal edge of Cava dei Tirreni, a town of tall villas and cobbled lanes with curving bridges overhead, and the faces of hungry people.

We came under cover of darkness from the beaches, and put our bivouacs and packs along the terraces, then began digging ourselves in. But by dawn we had dug only a few inches down.

When the sun was above the horizon there was a sudden swift breathing in the sky, and the first mortar-bomb fell in the midst of the trees, its smoke slowly rolling up and clinging among the leaves. Everybody lowered his head and turned to watch the smoke thoughtfully, knowing what must come. Eyes become young looked at the branches below: is it I? is it I?

Most of the first shells fell with great celebration into the deep, shrouded place of statues, where a young Italian woman was sitting on one of the benches. A shell-splinter, very small, grazed past her temple and made a long wound, not at all serious:

OF SINS AND WINTER

but she sat on the bench holding her head and crying out in brief astounded shrieks as the shells split and cracked and boomed among the trees. We scrambled up and down the terraces amid the pungent, drifting smoke as the shells drew nearer, then flung ourselves flat on the wet earth, hiding our heads. There was an endless scrambling to and fro as the shells came down in cruel hand-fulls.

One of the soldiers could no longer bear the Italian woman's appalled shrieking, and he shouted down to her: "Oh, shut up! for Christ's sake!" Then he murmured to himself, close to my ear, complaining: "She's not hurt as bad as all that." The same thing happened, I remember, at Salerno: a man with quite a mild wound in his leg shrieked at the top of his voice continually for ten minutes or so. It is the shriek of terrified astonishment, more than pain: for the first sensation of a splinter-wound is usually one of numbness, so that sometimes men do not know they have been wounded until they notice the blood on their limbs. The 'badly wounded seldom shriek out like this: more often than not they give up faint, pale cries of "Help. Help." Near Cassino the captain who had seemed to me a victim of battle-snobbery and who later, I think, became very grudgingly fond of me, died in the dark, amid only mud, saying quietly that his arm was hurting, whereas his arm was untouched, and the wound was at the back of his head.

This shriek of terrified astonishment seemed to say: this cannot happen to *me*, not to *me*. That is what made us impatient, and finally pitiless: for why could it not happen to *them* as to anybody else? Had

PART ONE

they never divined what it must be like to be a victim? Had they seen the wounded and the dying, but only drawn themselves apart, as the specially chosen, as the clean people of the suburbs, to whom nothing real could happen?

There were two casualties among my men, and when the shells lifted they were taken by stretcher to the kitchen of a house on the outskirts of the town. One was taken to hospital with a bad wound in his arm, and the other died slowly.

This was by no means a spectacular baptism. Everything was quiet in the room. There was nothing of great horror: only the moaning of an old woman, in sympathy, and the quiet, respectful treading of soldiers. Only a man died. But my discovery was such that I turned away quickly and began weeping.

Describing that one death would seem to me like a fresh perpetration, I do not know why: there is a mystery we have to shun because we are alive, and of its terrible signs we have to be silent witnesses.

To see, with your own eyes, to see: that is absolutely necessary. My breaking-in was accomplished. At Cava dei Tirreni the spirit of the child was yielded up, because only men are crucified.

This evening I had my closest view of the Enemy so far.

They asked me to join them for a drink, and I sat down at the table beside an iron-welder from the railway at Bleitnau. He was about my age, and he had close-cropped hair and bloodshot eyes. We sat close

OF SINS AND WINTER

together, both in our shirt-sleeves, and began poring over a dictionary on the table between us, apart from the others. There were five visitors from Bleitnau, two of them young women. They were town-people, neat in their dress and more alert in their ways than the farm-workers.

One of the men giggled continually at our efforts to make ourselves understood to each other, sometimes in English and sometimes in German, but when I suddenly looked up and spoke to him he instantly agreed, before the words were quite out, nodding his head solemnly, as if I were a professor. Then he turned back to the women again and went on telling them his jokes.

The other man in the party was a bachelor, a plump and conceited man dressed in the traditional leather breeches. He poured himself glass after glass of *schnapps* and tried to fondle the young women, smiling weakly at them, looking first into their eyes, then at their breasts.

"He is forty," the iron-welder told me, "and he is still not married."

The bachelor sang and lolled back in his chair, laughing and crying out, his lips red and very wet. The iron-welder turned to the letter R in the German section of the dictionary.

"You are my redeemer," he said.

I looked at the word in the dictionary to which he was pointing,—*redeemer*.

"You are my redeemer against this man," he whispered to me, pointing at the bachelor. "You are my excuse for not drinking with him."

The bachelor made several references to the

PART ONE

dictionary. He made jokes to the others about the *intelligence* of these two men and their *beautiful* book. He filled my glass with *schnapps*, then said, "*Pros't*," thus obliging me to raise my glass and return the toast. He seemed to grow ashamed of his drunkenness, and my glances seemed to perplex him. He kept leaning over towards me and shaking his head, saying forlornly, "*Nicht immer, na, na, nicht immer*," wanting to explain that he was not always drunk.

Suddenly he pushed open the window and was sick on the lawn outside, then he called for a pint glass of water. He began to sing with the glass raised in his hand, then all at once he pitched it high in the air so that the water came down in a shower over the table, drenching the iron-welder's shirt-sleeve and the dictionary. He looked solemn and contrite for a moment, but he was happy to have done this. He shook his head, musing quietly. "They are so intelligent, these men."

He took out his handkerchief and began stroking the water off the book with exaggerated delicacy. He leaned over towards me and said: "I am a small man."

He felt in one of his trouser pockets and fetched out his identity papers, signed and stamped by each of the four occupying powers. He showed it to me, turning the pages slowly, as if it were an interesting book. Again and again he said: "I am a small man. Everybody should be equal. I am a small man."

He yawned and rubbed his eyes. He looked about him for a moment, then he lay down on one of the benches at my side and fell asleep.

"The pig's off," Frau Glassner murmured, gazing at him.

OF SINS AND WINTER

She talks bitterly to me about all the men who come to her house simply in order to drink her *schnapps*.

"A cock can fart," she tells me, "but it can't lay eggs."

Her eyes are narrow and shining when she says this, and she bends down, pushing out her behind obscenely, making a long farting noise with her mouth.

Suddenly she sat down at my side this evening, apart from the others and murmured, "I'm too poor to pay forty-five schillings a year to the Church. Perhaps the new President will change all that."

She described how the priests grew fat on her money. She puffed out her dry cheeks, imitating their grossness. She said that when a poor man died there was only the most perfunctory funeral. The bell went, "*Ding, dong, ding, dong*," very quickly, then it was all over. But when a rich man died, the bell tolled solemnly and slowly, "*dong . . . dong . . . dong . . . dong*," and crowds came to the church. She described this fiercely. She walked up and down in the kitchen, slowly pulling the stately bell with her thin right arm.

Then two more men came. One of them is her lover, and the other Philip. This lover of hers is elderly now, a miner, and the father of two of her children. While he was here a May bug suddenly flew into the room like a pellet, very fast, then it dashed about blindly under the light. He jumped up and caught the insect between his forefingers. He has a sharp face and a moustache, and in his eyes there is a quite dead expression.

He showed me the insect, leaning over the table.

5911
17.4.56.
Rn 6/8

PART ONE

He was delighted to be able to do this. He watched me for a moment, perhaps hoping that the May bug in his fingers, waving its black furry legs, would horrify me. He pointed to these legs and described how the insect gripped wood with them and how they were strong like pincers.

"It attacks the trees," he said. "It can ruin them."

The bug had a hard back and a globe-head with huge eyes. It turned its head slowly from side to side, like a sad god, but at the same time it struggled with its forelegs.

"A May bug must always be killed," he said. "And only a hammer will do it. Look, look."

He tapped it very hard on its back and then on its head with the nail of his index finger, showing me how hard its protective shell was. He was delighted to be able to hold it in this way. He pointed out the bug's forelegs and head and back like a scientist, turning it upside down each time while it struggled and turned its huge face from side to side. The way he did all this filled me with such a lonely disgust that I wanted to leave this desolate valley at once.

Later on Philip, a worker from one of the other farms nearby, got very drunk and threatened to fight me. Everybody thinks him soft in the head. He always comes into the house roaring for *schnapps*. He looks like a pirate, with a thick Imperial moustache and a stubble beard, and fine blue eyes and black teeth. His eyes always blaze in his tiny skull, and when he is drunk he makes sudden, quick, wild gestures like a madman. He tears at his trousers and bangs his stick on the floor, roaring and singing, then he leans his head back and smiles at everyone

OF SINS AND WINTER

like a child. His light blue eyes are full of pity and honour. It is the face of fools and children.

I went into the sitting-room to eat my dinner and left the door ajar, while the others went on drinking. First of all the men sang and shouted together, pulling each other about on the bench, but very soon they began to quarrel. The bachelor was still asleep. I could not understand the strange guttural rush of dialect. But suddenly Philip stood up, kicked away the bench and the butter churn before him, and stumbled towards the doorway leading into my room. He swayed there, frowning and smiling. He shouted something, then began waving his fists at me, his chin thrust forward and his chest bared. The miner instantly jumped up and held on to his arms weakly from behind, crying out like a stage-character, clearly intending his words for my ears alone, "*Schwein, Philip! Du Schwein!*" while Frau Glassner continued to sit at the table, resigned to the fruitless quarrelling of men, her hands covering her face.

I stood up, half bent over the table, ready to ward off Philip's blows if he came into the room. But suddenly he lowered his arms and began smiling again, like the happiest child. The bad dream had passed. The other man let go of his arms, and Philip looked into my eyes as if a wonderful joke had just been secretly shared between us.

In those few moments I felt like the Enemy. Only from fools and children shall I learn the truth . . . Often in the blind depths of Philip's mind must the words have sounded again and again: "*The English, the Enemy.*" It is six years after the capitulation, but war is a life-time. I feel like a spy in this farmhouse.

PART ONE

Indeed, I must often look to them like a spy, peering into the cattle-house, standing on the brow of the hill above the house for hours on end, listening closely to all their conversations, staring into the faces of all the men who come from the other farms: a spy, rather than an Englishman on his way to Vienna.

I came up to bed soon after half-past three and lay in the dark listening to their voices below. But I could not sleep. I can hear the shrill voices of the young women remonstrating, Frau Glassner's sudden hard shout, the iron-welder's laughter and the conceited chuckle of the bachelor, now awake again. I have been lying for two hours like this, with my eyes open, so strange is it to be behind the Enemy lines, to be in their very midst and yet be free.

I remember the German soup-kitchen which was turned on its side by a shell, how I opened all its covers to have a look at the strange food, now spilled and cold. I came across it suddenly, near a gravel path, and for a long time I stared at these covers with fascination.

I remember the hay-barn where the German rear-guard had been only a few minutes before, how I smelt the smoke from their cigarettes, still in the air, and looked closely at their ration-tins containing coffee still luke-warm. The sight of one of the Enemy strolling on the other side of the line was always ecstatic and terrible to me.

I felt an extraordinary wonder when I crossed the border from Italy into Austria in 1945. I sat in the jolting car smiling and talking at the top of my voice,

OF SINS AND WINTER

excited as I had not been for weeks. A vast plain stretched out on either side of the arterial road, and everything I saw in the morning sunlight—the irrigation trenches, the inns standing amid quiet lawns, the ruined houses—had a fabulous and legendary look.

The Enemy was a forbidden dream, a deep ghostly voice in the back of the night calling and once more calling, always threatening the child with terror. And now, to see for myself that they have faces, childhoods and real lives—how difficult it is for me even now to believe it, to believe the obvious.

I remember the house with broken steps which stood dead and still amid long grass. It was behind trees, stately and tall, and it received us gracefully, like an ancient house, putting out an old gentleman's hand to the brown-faced murderers. The mosaic floor was cracked, there were chipped urns on either side of the stone steps, and hanging, torn shutters.

I went up to one of the top attic rooms and looked carefully out of the small window, keeping to the shadows. There was a white cottage only about one hundred yards forward where the Enemy was still thought to be. It was at the end of wonderful soft green parkland.

Downstairs I saw the Major with a young soldier, a boy of nineteen or so. They were standing by one of the shuttered windows. I remained in the doorway and I saw that the boy was weeping. His head was bowed and he was crying to the Major that he could not go up in this attack.

The Major told him that it was a simple attack. He laughed and asked him what he was afraid of.

PART ONE

The boy said, "I am not used to it, sir," for the other fighting earlier that morning had frightened him.

The Major put his arm round his neck, chucked him under the chin, hugged him close and said, "Come on, son, come on." But the child wept in the Major's arms, and replied that he would be killed, he knew he would. He looked up and asked quietly: "Can I stay behind with company headquarters until I feel better?" But the Major shook his head. "Suppose all my boys asked to stay behind with headquarters," he said, "who would there be to do the fighting for me? Look at the corporal there—is he afraid?"

The child reluctantly glanced sideways at the corporal through his tears. The corporal was all the time standing close by him, a Londoner, holding himself stiffly as he watched the child with calm eyes, seeming to congratulate himself.

The Major talked into the boy's ear like a man with his wife, and told him that the corporal would stay with him.

"Won't you, corporal?"

The corporal nodded.

"You'll be all right when you are out there with the others," the Major told him. "My boys never let me down. I'm not going to let them say that anybody in 'A' company let them down."

And at last, wiping his eyes, the young soldier went out with the corporal into the naked open air, and the white cottage was waiting.

He was killed. Someone told me that he was found by a hedge without a mark on his body. It was said that two patrolling Germans had suddenly looked

OF SINS AND WINTER

over the hedge, they had shouted and run away, and then he was found dead. They believed he died of terror.

The vision was too great for this child.

My childhood gave me a strange foretaste of murder. I can still remember a certain dark house, like a tiny hut, with a back-yard where a dog was always leashed up. I can remember the noise of one of the men falling downstairs; it was a kind of terrible catastrophic tumbling. The men drank until they were violent, then they went into the back-yard and fought it out. They wore bowler hats. I can remember their dreadful scuffling in the back-yard, and the silence among the women, with fools and children at their knees. Everybody was packed into one hot room. There were long roads of such houses, close together, a black land, their doors opening straight out on to the pavement, a corridor into nothing, where nothing breathed. This was the prison of streets where I was born.

From the gutter I graduated, after a brief truancy, to war. I am now twenty-eight years of age, and of these twenty-eight years the War consumed seven. I played truant to the War during the first two years, and the time-limit made my happiness the greater.

My truancy was a steep green hill, a dark lower room underneath this hill, a village with a church hidden and alone, a hill breathing grass and trees, and my truancy was a dream I lived, turning in my country bed with joy and pain at dawn, before the town was awake. It was a truancy made possible by

PART ONE

the War alone, and, logically, it was brought to an end by the War. I was evacuated into the country with other school-children in September, 1939, and when I arrived I stared at the grey, ruffled lake, at the islands of tall trees, at the gravel path where chestnut horses were sometimes to be seen, at the cafés in the main street, at the cobbled square, at the rare green hills to the north, I stared at everything with astonishment and blessed the War for being the instrument of my release, in a place where at last I could breathe, where I was not watched, where lonely ghosts of men did not walk, where the dawn came up with no ugly contradiction outside my window, and where at evening there were no deathly street-lamps, but the starting of small animals in the grass.

In my work as an officer I combined the role of the abstract murderer with that of the victim. My work fell into two parts: one when I was at the gun-position a mile or so behind the front line, commanding four guns; the other when I went forward with the infantry in the attack and sent orders for shell-fire back to the artillery lines by wireless or telephone.

At the gun-position I gave my orders calmly from a command post, and here I was usually warm, and the Enemy bombardments were not frequent. But with the infantry I suffered the falling of shells, the guns were distant mouths full of anonymous grumble, I suffered the crying of men, the lodging in flesh of splinter and bullet, the slipping in mud, the silliness of men after shock, and the hurrying of stretchers.

OF SINS AND WINTER

As I shouted my orders to the guns, my feet dry and my hands clean, God smiled and said, *Wait, child.*

I would be called out to go with the infantry every fortnight or so for three, four, six or seven days at a time. I would take with me on these operations two or three signallers and wireless sets. Thus, I travelled alone. I was with the infantry, and separate from them. They asked my advice and sought the protection of my guns. I could be the key to the success of a battle. I was a murderer whose survival was of the greatest importance to them and whom they often admired and flattered. With one word addressed to my signaller I could achieve the murder of countless Enemy in two, three or four minutes.

While I had to walk and run with the infantry, go to ground with them, hide in silence, I also had to do more: I had to keep in touch with the rear by wireless or telephone, be ready to quote my exact place on the map, and also bring down the fire of guns far behind us. I could not, in terror and heat, pull the trigger of a machine-gun and vent my anger, making the whole night clatter. But I always had to make a slight withdrawal from the quick and warm, never cease to realise myself as the separate and indispensable brain.

To turn from a novice into a scholar of war was to learn how to make mental calculations in the midst of terror: that is to say, to learn the science of abstract murder.

On my dressing-table there are photographs of Frau Glassner, the miner and Theresa. There is lace-work

PART ONE

by Frau Glassner's hand, and a silver casket which I know was given her as a wedding present. It has only just occurred to me, as I stare at these things, that the Italian farmhouses I stayed in during the War were not real in my eyes.

In the bedrooms upstairs there were always certificates of birth, marriage and death; crucifixes, letters, rosaries, greeting cards, little pieces of lace-work and valueless trinkets; photographs going yellow of children dressed for their first communion and of brides and bridesmaids. Everything was heaped on the floor where other troops had searched the drawers. But for me these things were not certificates, rosaries, trinkets and photographs; they were rubbish on the floor I slept among them, or I pushed them out of the way to make a place for my map. They were mere things for me, dead of human touch. They were abstract. And I realise now that I was their murderer.

Such a farmhouse became a breeding-ground for our murders the moment we put a foot inside. I remember a signaller bringing me an exciting message from Headquarters in one of them. I walked across to the graph-board at once and read it. The message was a little jocular.

It said that at two o'clock that same afternoon sixty or seventy Germans would be assembling on a hill within easy shelling range of the English lines. They intended to launch a surprise attack, but Headquarters suggested that the initiative be reversed.

There would be an artillery concentration on this hill beginning at precisely two o'clock.

OF SINS AND WINTER

The guns of the entire division would be laid on this target. The distances for each gun would be very carefully computed so that the closest concentration of shells would be possible. If Headquarters were lucky sixty or seventy Germans would find themselves in the midst of this concentration.

They would find themselves without cover and nowhere to run on the summit of a naked hill.

The guns would be fired off at the very same moment so that the shells landed simultaneously, thus ensuring the maximum casualties.

My signallers and I began computing the distances immediately. We were excited and flushed. We moved about briskly and we made little jokes to each other. The message had changed our day. The ache was less. We were planning murder, but abstract murder, that is to say, the murder of people we would never see, a murder that was never any more than an idea to us, the perpetrators.

Hence, we were for the moment cheerfully at home in our epoch, we fitted, we were playing the role for which we had been born.

Again and again the words occur to me, *abstract murder*, as if they were the keywords to our epoch and ourselves. It is as if this place were forcing upon me a confession, little by little. But the Enemy? There is no Enemy here, nothing secret or forbidden, only men and women. All my sense of living behind the Enemy lines has gone. And I am disappointed. I thought everything would fall into place, that I would experience a kind of homecoming, full of the wonder I felt when I came into the country from the other side of the Alps.

PART ONE

The sound of bells from the church in the valley comes winding and clanging up the hill to this house, changing furiously with each gust of wind, through the moving mists. Everything in the house is damp. There is no fire in my room. If I go down to the hot kitchen I find I can hardly breathe and am instantly involved in the slow, shouted conversations about the price of cloth or the lost son. So I stride about my room, or lie on my bed with my shoes off and an eiderdown thrown over me, or go for impossible walks in the rain and mud, slipping and stumbling across the bouldery mountain stream near the house, climbing the stiles, and walking up the steep fields until I reach the sombre fir-wood where no bird stirs and where the rain drips down to the forest-floor through the silence, leaf-surrounded.

A huge inviolable silence hangs about this house, islanded by mist.

A month has passed since I came here on a freak summer's day. During that month I have looked again and again into Frau Glassner's face, into her daughter's face, into the faces of the men who come here to drink *schnapps*—just as if they would yield me a key! But a key to what?

The other day I went to a nearby cemetery and for a whole hour stared at the photographs of young soldiers on the tombstones.

Frau Glassner told me that there had been a prison-camp for Russians, French, English and Americans in this very valley, and I spent the whole day looking for the marks of its existence along the river-bank: I walked four or five miles along the path overlooking the river, then back again, trying to

OF SINS AND WINTER

imagine the huts as they had been, the barbed wire, the guards, the sudden deaths, the arrival of trains from the Eastern front.

Only now is this strange obsession beginning to die, on this first stage of my journey. I feel ready to leave, and in a few days' time I shall go to Salzburg. This is my voyage into the provinces of murder, and I do not know where it will lead me.

Part 2

IN the dark entrance-hall of the Salzburg Natural History Museum there was a great stuffed sea-elephant with a black, oily skin. I went up the narrow staircase and on either side of me there were little skeletons, insects behind glass, stuffed birds, spears, coloured diagrams and segments of tropical trees. At the first landing I entered one of the rooms and walked across the loose boards.

Every thing was dead and still, behind glass, staring out. The stair and the long room were dark and heavy, and outside the windows the sky was thick and low. The men and women I saw trod softly up and down the stairs and through the rooms, the boards creaking and creaking as they went, like trespassers. Sometimes they peered closely into the lighted cases where the dead insects, the dead birds, the dead snakes, the dead bones and dry flesh were exhibited, and sometimes their faces were like green masks in the light from these cases. I felt sick with the sign of death, its ghostly attendance on this tall house with the creaking boards. There were a thousand and one silent funerals in this house near the tunnel.

I went past the human heads shrivelled to a quarter of their natural size, past the bony dinosaur, past the nest of transfixed ants and the bees' hive, past coffins and a yellow mummy. Then I saw a child standing alone by a curtain. He was sobbing. Beyond

OF SINS AND WINTER

the curtain I could make out little electric lamps and more glass cases, and also people moving. When his sobs became particularly loud, a pale, slim man with small eyes came out from behind the curtain and looked at him impatiently. I heard him whisper to the child, "*Mutti kommt gleich!*" He refused to let the child go inside.

The sobs were outrageous—too human and warm—in this room of still, dead things. I was inquisitive to know what lay behind the curtain, and I walked on. I pulled the curtain slightly aside and went through, and instantly I noticed that there was a greater hush here, though there was a bigger crowd than elsewhere in the museum. I pushed my way towards the lighted cases, and saw shrivelled creatures of the womb, some of them preserved in their mother's placenta, and two plaster casts, one of a human penis, the other of a human lip, both of them painted with a red syphilitic wound. One of the bottled embryos was a cyclops with a single eye immediately above the nose; another had two heads on one neck; another was strangled by its umbilical cord; and another was natural and whole, at four months, its legs drawn up, its skin-hand raised to its mouth. I looked at the sobbing child's mother and father as they left this forbidden place, and they seemed to me thoughtful and heavy, like those who are guilty. From their own child they seemed separate now, in a sinister collaboration with each other, and it was against this that he cried out. The glass case was a lighted mortuary behind them, with its marriage of syphilis and love. I stared aghast at these things. I found that my cheeks were trembling. I

PART TWO

wanted to lie down in a silent room and wear this horror out.

I stopped and looked at some white plaster statues. They represented the four human types—the digestive, the athletic, the respiratory and the cerebral—and they stood side by side, naked, white and blind, like patients in a hospital. They were statues of men, but of men rendered abstract. They were murdered men, murdered as everything else was murdered here, so that there should be embalmed things for the trudging spectators.

Everything was embalmed here, everything was stuck on pins or stuffed or desiccated, everything was rendered eternal for the dreaming stares of abstract men. The museum is a biography, not of beasts, plants, or past epochs of men, but of ourselves the embalmers. Things and people become dead to our touch because we are each in exile.

I looked at a life-size replica behind glass of some Red Indian family. I saw two tents, their canvas genuinely weather-beaten, a woman giving suck to her child, almost quick and warm, and people drinking coffee at the mouth of one of the tents. They were there for all eternity, dumb and blind, the same woman with her same outstretched human hand, the same old man bowing to her with cloth to sell over his arm, and the same mother with the same blind mother's smile. We wanted to possess them for all eternity, we wanted to pin them down: so we murdered them.

At this moment, back in my hotel room, I would like to see Bleitnau again, though I left there very happily less than a week ago. I want to see the white

OF SINS AND WINTER

stones of the ravine and the mountain-water going over them. I want to see the hill behind my balcony. I want to hear the padded knocking of the mare's hoof on the lawn outside as she trots between the trees, the water shaking in her belly.

My horror and anger made me blind. I walked through Salzburg back to this hotel like a man with his eyes put out. I rushed up the stone steps to my room and slammed the door.

An accident could occur in Bleitnau, one of the men could collapse and die at work in the fields, but the accidents would not be hoarded up for your gaze, they would take their places in the days and years.

On my way back I walked behind an old woman. She was leaning on the arm of a girl at her side. She stepped carefully across the pebbles, and she was nodding and smiling to the girl. They walked close together, like mother and daughter, and perhaps they were going back from church, for today is Sunday.

I looked at her long coat and her flat-heeled shoes, and she seemed to change under my eyes, only because of the Museum. I saw her suddenly as a patient, like one of the white plaster statues. I saw her as someone with symptoms walking into hospital, one of many, with interesting senile affections of the liver, the stomach and the bones. She was no longer the Sunday mother with whom I might talk, no longer a woman who smiled and would die in her due time. The Museum was behind me and reached forward its hand. I embalmed her image, and in that moment I was her murderer. She looked to me in that moment like one of too many people: there are

PART TWO

too many people in our cities, there are too many of us in the epoch of abstraction. With the doctor's marvellous cure must come the murder.

The nature of abstract murder was revealed to me at Castel Poggiolo, that is to say, not until the second part of our operations in Italy. After three sleepless nights we arrived at a country mansion soon after dawn, in the flat of the valley. Headquarters was established in this mansion while I, accompanied by a platoon of infantry, went to one of the farmhouses nearby.

I walked about this house restlessly, for the battle had died and I was unwilling to sleep. I wanted to do something, compute a distance, talk over the radio, make plans for the evening attack. For three days and three nights my head had obeyed and worked and been cunning; now it could not stop.

I walked about the house, looking out of the window on to Enemy territory, peering about for some movement and seeing nothing. I wanted something to happen, a German demolition party to blow up a bridge in the middle of the valley before me, or a platoon of German infantry to walk out of the two-storey house on the horizon. But the valley lay in silence and stillness. I passed unnecessary messages down the wireless to the artillery lines, and walked from one room to another nervously on the look-out.

Then I decided to climb up to the hay-loft. There was a little opening in the apex of the roof from which most of the valley could be seen. I quietly called my signaller upstairs. He clipped a cable

OF SINS AND WINTER

extension on to his wireless set and brought up the earphones, then sat down at my side. I continued to watch the horizon, where the two-storey house lay. It was yellow and clean-looking, and still there was no movement whatsoever. I gave my first orders: "*Target . . . Fire by order . . . One round gun-fire.*" We waited for these orders to be repeated back, and the word was given from the artillery lines: *Ready*. Calmly I said, not raising my voice at all: "Fire."

The first shell fell short of the house in the distance, a little burst and puff of pretty white smoke. I added one hundred yards and again gave the order to fire. I waited for the shell-bursts in silence, leaning forward and peering through the window of the hay-loft. I was passing the time, playing an interesting game with these puffs of smoke in the distance. I achieved a hit on the left side of the roof and then I warmly ordered all four guns to fire on this reference. The four shells fell immediately around the house, very close to the walls, so that for a moment they hid the lower floor from view. I gave the order to record the target for future use, then finished.

The afternoon grew dull. A winter wind came sideways across the valley. I was summoned to the country mansion nearby. There I was told to take seven or eight infantrymen and two of my own signallers into the Enemy lines by daylight. I was shown the house I must occupy, and the house was precisely the one I had just been bombarding.

I was being taken by the hand to the place of my murder.

The commanding officer told me I need expect no opposition, since the Enemy was believed to have

PART TWO

fallen back from the yellow house. The plan was for me to remain there until evening, waiting for the English attack to draw level. The forward troops would be told of my presence on the flank.

I left with my men a little later. They followed behind me in single file, through some trees, then downwards into the open valley. We marched directly towards the yellow house, not troubling to skirt the fields because there was so little cover. I looked from side to side at the hills above us, waiting for the Enemy to open fire. I turned and looked back at my men, and they were walking in silence behind me, palely, as they did when they walked into the attack. But we reached the other side of the valley untroubled.

We came close to the house and saw no movement through the windows. I went to the door and pushed it open, and before me, in a clean living-room, there were five or six Italian people. I nodded to them and they all smiled carefully. They were not peasants, I think, but people from one of the big coastal towns. The furniture was dainty, and there were good carpets on the floor. There were three men and two women, all of them over thirty.

They gave us chairs in the kitchen, and the women took our army rations and began cooking us a hot meal, to be eaten on plates, not in mess-tins, and with knives and forks from the house. I watched the two younger people, a man and a woman, probably married. They were excited by our visit, and bustled about the kitchen-stove making jokes to each other and marvelling at the army rations of beef and soup. The man had fine black eyes and crisp hair.

OF SINS AND WINTER

He answered my questions intelligently, making everything seem calmer and more orderly than it was. He and his wife were delighted to be cooking a meal for eleven mouths. They brought in more chairs, laid the tablecloth, poured red wine. There was a great noise in the kitchen and everyone was smiling.

I asked them whether the Germans had been here, and the woman replied that they had left early that morning. I looked at her with a feeling of great shame and asked, leaning forward on the table: "Were you shelled this morning?"

"Oh, yes."

They all raised their hands and looked upwards, half-smiling, with their baptismal story to tell.

"Where did you shelter?"

They told me under the stairs.

"Was the house hit?"

The young man said that one shell had hit the roof, but that was all. "Only one room was damaged, that is all."

"I did that shelling," I told them, then, tapping my own chest: "*Io, io.*"

He was charming with me. He smiled. He looked at me as if I were somehow valuable, as if I had been intelligent and good to throw the shells.

Before the meal was served I asked if I might go upstairs. I went up alone and closed the door behind me. On the upstairs landing I saw the damaged room. There was a long tear in the roof. The wall had fallen away into the room, and through it could be seen the countryside. The carpet was covered with brick-dust, the dressing-table was broken, pots

PART TWO

and jars were lying under the window smashed, with powder, jewels and perfume spilled out in a crushed heap, and on the silken double bed long, black, sharp pieces of slating from the roof. I was astonished at the force with which my pretty shell had struck the wall. Only a puff of smoke had I seen, and the burst had been quite noiseless.

I walked into one of the other rooms and sat on the bed, unbuckling my binocular case. I looked through the window and saw that I was looking down the main street of a village to a square with a church on its right-hand side. I could have thrown a stone on to the pavement. I watched it for some time, then to my astonishment I saw a German soldier come out of one of the doors and stroll like an evening walker up and down. I took up my binoculars and watched him, so close and terrible. I was especially fascinated by his tin hat, which was curved over the ears. I wanted to hunt this flesh, to see it capitulate before me. It was wrong for him to be walking freely so close by. I felt that I owned him, like an animal with its feebly struggling prey. But I withdrew further into the darkness and went downstairs.

I gave my position in code to Headquarters, and at once an officer took up the microphone at the other end. He told me to return without fail at dusk, that I was in the Enemy lines, that he did not know how this had happened, that I must return the moment dusk fell, the very moment, and that meanwhile I must be alert with sentries out.

At dusk I took my men back across the valley. My visit was useless. It had been a mistake, and no one

OF SINS AND WINTER

discovered the origin of that mistake. But now it appears to me not at all useless: it was a revelation, an uncanny guidance. To see, to see, that is of the utmost importance.

This evening I went up to the castle in Salzburg and looked down across the valley far below. It was dusk. Behind me there was a parapet and a huge wooden door with a postern. The dusk grew as I stood there. Lights came up in the valley, there was the sound from below of someone practising the bugle, and the last illuminated thing was a mountain peak opposite me, high and red, quite alone in the sky.

If the Enemy had been there I would have seen no lights, there would have been no people riding bicycles along the lanes, no carts carrying hay, no bugle. It would have been the impossible, and also lovely, this valley, because somewhere in it there would have been a line, and beyond this line would have lain the Enemy in their strange dream-territories, impenetrable like the sky. The battle-field is an animal kingdom; the question of happiness does not interest us there.

Just after a battle I used sometimes to walk into this dream-territory, staring at the young black shell-holes and the smouldering ruins, picking my way carefully for fear of mines. Seldom would there be birds, only this quietly smouldering aftermath.

I remember walking up the hill near Rimini to a smouldering house: and for the second time I came face to face with my own work.

We came within sight of Rimini, under shell-fire

PART TWO

and mortar-bombardments all the way, then stopped at a house near the brow of a hill, against the very nose of the Enemy. But no sooner did we have our bedding down and a fire of twigs lit in the kitchen than the Major became nervous and wanted to leave our untactical position the moment dusk fell. It would be easy for the Enemy to rush us, so close were we to the crest of the hill. On the other hand, to withdraw across the valley again, under shell-fire, would be to risk further casualties. I persuaded him to stay in this house because by now I felt that the valley behind us was of bad omen.

He agreed on the condition that I bombard the Enemy house just above us on the crest incessantly throughout the night. We talked in whispers, apart from the other men. I said I would do this.

Hidden in the dark, scourged by my shells, the house on the brow of the hill caught fire and made the bare, treeless, furrowed fields light up orange along the night. All the surrounding approaches were thus illuminated for us, which was a tactical advantage.

In the morning we took that house. The prisoners and our own wounded were brought in, and the battle stalked over the hill and a mile away, leaving the ploughed fields charred, the air bitter with fumes from the shells, the gates and fences broken, and the house on the brow of the hill still smouldering.

I walked out into the roadway, staring up at the silent dream-territory, then towards the rising smoke behind the trees. I took a path through these trees and came upon the house suddenly. The shrubs round it were black, and the upper storey had

OF SINS AND WINTER

tumbled in. The door of the kitchen was hanging open.

I went round to the side of the house and stopped as I noticed some movement in the bushes. It was probably a German, still free. I listened. I watched the bushes, then, fearing that he might be a sniper, turned hastily back to the front of the house. I looked down and just before I stepped forward I saw that part of my right boot was on the leg of a German officer. His body was almost buried in the dust from the walls, like flat parchment. I stepped wide and went to the front again. The sight made me nervous, and I felt too much alone. The smouldering fire made a strange wheezing noise and a very faint crackling.

Then I heard the voice of a woman. She was moaning. So I went towards the hanging door.

Inside the dark, hot kitchen there were two old women. One of them was by the table, her eyes seeing nothing, though she knew I had come, and the flesh was open in her leg. They came towards me. How had they survived? I could not see across the room for white smoke. They prayed to me with their hands, they held up their hands and cried to me, they called on my mercy, help us, help us, and I could not bear that dreadful open flesh. They had suffered all the night in flames at my hand, the world had been set alight and the sky had sung and the world's upper storey had tumbled down, as the officer lay in the garden in his vestment of dust. All night they had prayed and cried out against the falling of blind shells, as the house had slowly burned away and their wounds become darker.

PART TWO

I ran back to Headquarters and went straight to the Major. I told him what I had seen. I looked into his eyes and wondered. I did not know when pity and murder went hand in hand. I remember speaking shyly. He jumped up at once and said: "Take me there." Then he called out to the stretcher-bearers and began walking up the hill. I followed him slowly. I saw him walk straight past the hanging door into the kitchen, and when I arrived I saw him standing there white and appalled, with his arms round their shoulders, shaking his head and saying, *No, no, no*.

I stood back, in reverence. For this was the handiwork of my monster computing brain.

But just as I learned to mete out terror, so it was given back to me, in retribution. Indeed, the story of my part in our first operations, before the nature of abstract murder was revealed to me, is a story solely of terror; in none of those first battles was I aware of any plan, no matter how many times the plan had been laid before me. The moment one of those battles began, everything became night and grief for me, became the crying of men and the bringing of stretchers; and I would wait endlessly for the dawn-like aftermath, when the dead, in dreadful attitudes where they had fallen, would cease to be like men and become mere objects, mementoes of a past which I had managed to survive. In battle there was no *I*, yet one pleaded with fate for survival, one prayed, for the sake of afterwards, when perhaps one would be able to reclaim the *I*.

At this moment my mind is full of the river, the

OF SINS AND WINTER

first river I crossed, and on the other side were the provinces of that terror which I had never suffered before.

I have just put down a book by one of the commanders of that operation. I have been reading chapter after chapter very quickly, frowning and excited, as if the words carried a special secret for me. Where "*the Commander brought his Corps close to the river*" the room became heavy with memory, and there were voices.

Some days before the assault on the River Volturno I sat with five officers in a room of a barracks on the outskirts of Naples, during the evening. We were sitting at table and the most senior of us, a major, said, "We have to decide who is going out with the attack." And during the silence that followed his words I held my breath, my heart-beats were faster, I gazed at the wall before me and held the leg of the table. It was late autumn, and this evening was a brief return to summer. The barracks were on the edge of Naples, high up, and the sea was silver in the distance. The windows of this room were open, but no sounds came from outside. The evening seemed garish and blood-stained, ecstatic, yet autumnal, sad, full of groaning regret.

One of the captains, 'he who had welcomed me on the beaches of Salerno, said he thought I ought to go, being the freshest of them. The senior officer was a kindly man, and he looked at me with a woman's smile as he agreed that I ought to be broken in.

During the afternoon before the attack I sat in a field reading a book, sometimes raising my eyes and looking at Vesuvius to the south. I remember that it

PART TWO

was a calm, warm day, and I was leaning against a haystack. The field was flat and immense, and the mountains in the distance were under mist. There was not a sound from the surrounding country. Both sides were waiting for dusk.

For three hours or so I sat there, dreaming my truancy back. While believers confess their sins for the last judgement, the godless daydream.

At ten o'clock that night I ran across a dark field near the river and was sick as I ran. I turned my head sideways and down so that I should not make a mess of my tunic and my map-case. There was a stifling smell of cordite, and all about us there were endless falling shells.

We advanced in long single file, pale in the dark, then as soon as the shells began to fall into the field we started running, trying for the cover of the ditches just short of the river.

There were men lying on the grass huddled together, holding communion with their fear. They made silent groups, still, like sleeping children. That is what they did under a bombardment: they lay flat down with their eyes closed, and each of them was the world.

The men with the mine detectors went ahead, rooting out the mines and laying white tape down to guide the infantry forward. People lost each other. They called out to each other quietly, between the deafening bursts, one companion to another, afraid of losing touch. Some were walking back, away from the line, seeking their truancy in the eleventh hour. The field was full of dazed men wandering this way and that, sometimes lying down, sometimes calling

OF SINS AND WINTER

for the stretchers, sometimes running towards the ditches on a sudden fancy.

At the southern bank of the river we waited for the boats to take us across. The water was dark and calm, with high rushes on either side. We lay down in the blackened shell-holes near the bank while the German gun wailed and wailed, mocking us. A long flame issued from the six barrels of this gun when it fired, and its six shells made a long harmonious chord across the sky like a choir before they fell, close together and almost simultaneously, with a quick fury, punishing the earth. This was called the Barrel Organ, because of its strange preliminary wail, which seemed to come straight out of the furthestmost heights of the sky and to compass the whole of the world.

I lay in one of the craters and the man next to me pushed his elbow against my side, grinding and grinding it round in his self-communion as the gun wailed again and the shells made their lovely chord, a cry like the last coitus in the world. Then I heard the quick, shocked yell of the major who had looked at me with a woman's smile, and I heard stretcher-bearers come to the edge of the crater and call down for volunteers to help with the wounded. And neither I nor any man there stirred. This was my first test. The world consisted of my terror. I could hear the major cursing and sighing. I heard the stretcher-bearers run towards him and call out, "Where? Where?"

Later I stood at the edge of the water waiting for the boat. The gun had stopped. A young captain was at my side. He told me that our major had lost his

PART TWO

leg but was still alive. In his hand he carried the major's map-case, covered with thick blood not yet dry. I watched him in the dark. I saw him bend down and quietly smell the blood. He did so secretly, as if I would not be able to see him in the dark. I remember that as I watched him my mind was full of one thought: "I am alive."

I learned terror for the first time in the late summer from another man. For battle has music and words which must be learned, and its usual noises conveyed no terror to me on the first, second or third day of my arrival at the beach-head, even though during those days the English were nearly pushed back into the water and the Enemy was in some places nearly one hundred yards from the beach. But on the afternoon of the fourth day I saw terror in the eyes of another man. I saw him start and throw himself to the ground. A shell fell only a few feet from him, and for a moment afterwards he looked hunted, as if he were a specially marked man. From that time on I knew what songs to listen for, and which were the dangerous songs, and which were the barks without a bite. Terror is protection; and I threw myself to the ground with the other men.

The bombardment of a city from the air has one music, a battle another. I was often afraid.

Cerasola happened in February, 1944, about five months after my baptism. But I was still bewildered by battle, and I still did not know how to talk over plans with the infantry, compute figures and register targets and pass messages down the wireless, simultaneously with feeling terror and keeping an ear open for the shell with my name on it. Later I learned how

OF SINS AND WINTER

to do this. My nerves became worse, not better, but bad nerves made me alert to the slightest noise, and they were an insurance against death. I did not like it when I ceased to feel fear. Fear was my magic. It made me go to ground at the right moment. I was aware of the shells before I heard them singing through the sky or saw them explode. Fear was my hidden oracle. According to my hidden oracle I waited a little here, ran forward there, occupied this house instead of that, apparently for no good reason. And I did not trust the oracles of other men. I knew men who had no oracles. Their eyes were helpless. The shells loved them and claimed them. I would stay and talk with men in a roadway for just as long as I felt it to be safe, but when the hidden oracle spoke I would leave them and take cover. Never herd.

My will to save my own skin slept only once, for less than twenty seconds, on the southern bank of the river which I have just described. I suddenly became dull as the Barrel Organ sang its chord in the sky: I did not care, I lay there with my eyes closed, dully ready to enter death. But then the shells exploded, six of them together, at the top of the crater where I was lying, and my fear suddenly quickened again amid the deafening crashes, and I tried like all the men round me to burrow and burrow my way into the black earth, scratching at it with my fingernails.

In a corner of one of the rooms downstairs there were two musicians, with a little card on the table in front of them: "*Bitte, für die Musik.*" I stayed there drinking *schnapps* for an hour last night. Listening to these

PART TWO

musicians closely there was a plump American soldier. He sat at their table nodding and smiling as they played. His coat was open in the front, his head was bowed, and he was happy and himself. When later two other soldiers looked in, thinner and younger, he called across to them and asked them to join him. They laughed and smiled with him, but without pleasure. They were brown-faced children, whereas he was father, calm and expansive, flushed. They were exiles. That was the abashed horror in their faces. We are exiles. You glance at us; your eyes say, *Soldier*, and you turn away. We are boys. We have mothers. We have childhoods. We have names. Under the ammunition belt there is a photograph.

The eyes are always judging. They are always coming to a conclusion. Your name for us is not us as we tenderly know ourselves to be, all that we have, all that we can ever be, each of us alone, high and dry with his sins and stains, a whole world more than your mere idea. You name us *soldier*, but you name not us.

The two boys went across to the musicians and asked for a German song, only to be charming and to be smiled at in return. The musicians could not understand their English, and the boys could not remember the name of the tune they wanted. One of them agreed to try to whistle it, and when he began the silence fell and was terrible. He whistled softly, without conviction, and gradually the murdering silence entered his flesh and at last he stopped whistling, paralysed and alone in his exile, the tune dead and forgotten on his hands. He said like a broken man, "Then it goes up to a higher pitch," waving his

OF SINS AND WINTER

hand high in the air to wave away the ghosts. The musicians shook their heads again, and then the soldiers smiled at them with the faces of beggars and walked across to the door and stumbled sick and hot into the night.

This morning I walked in the woods at Hellbrunn, and everything was still and waiting. The air was dumb and heavy before a storm. I walked through the leaves, and the trees made a hot, closed dome round me, the twigs and bracken stirred and cracked under my feet. I walked in other Austrian woods during the autumn of 1945, also before rain, when I had been released from the bonds of my crucifixion, though not released unconditionally.

During 1946 and 1947 I would blush and my heart would beat faster at the mention in conversation of the word *battle*, or at the questions, *Were you in the army? Where did you serve during the War?* I was a mute wanting to make my ghostly revelation, and I went down into the pit, and the sky sang again. *What did you do during the War?* Show me the place, take me by the hand and lead me there, and, tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor and clever shirker, take off the bandages and let me see what they did to you. You are alone in this, but you are all of us.

The legend grew up among my signallers that wherever I went the battle became worse. They said to each other, He has got a magnet in his pocket.

I remember that when I first entered a battle-area I did not believe in war. That is what the others must have seen in my face,—the innocent disbelief in evil that the novice has.

It was when I stood at the edge of an orchard in

PART TWO

Salerno on the 8th of September, 1943, and listened to a senior officer talking quietly with four or five of his men. They were standing in the next field, a few yards in front of me, and I was hidden in the shadow under one of the trees. I heard the officer tell them that, though they were headquarters troops, the time had come for them to fight, that the infantry positions had been overrun and that the Enemy were less than two hundred yards away. He told them to dig themselves in just short of the road and to shoot at anything they saw during the night. None of them must sleep. The entire beach-head could depend on their alertness. But I did not believe it. I did not believe that the officer was in earnest, or that the battle was real. I had not come prepared for the dying of actual men, and I thought this must be an exercise behind the lines. I did not believe that by walking one hundred and fifty yards away from the sea I could get myself captured. The Enemy could not be so close, I was too young.

This was three days before I learned terror and two weeks before my baptism at Cava dei Tirreni. I stood at the edge of the orchard in the dusk, unseen, with the sea breathing close by, and already preparations were going forward for the death of the child.

In war it is easy for people to die, even the wise and ageless and infallible. The world is prolific with dying. It is easy for buildings to fall to the ground, even the eternal ones with the important frown. The women we loved starve in camps, the churches where we prayed are canteens, and the villages of our truancy become silly. By the time it is over the sacred

OF SINS AND WINTER

and eternal things are no longer there. Do not say *sacred and eternal*. The words *sacred and eternal* are ridiculous. They do not belong to your world. Your religion is dead, and as for eternity, war is the shadow that constantly falls on your sleeve. If you still believe in the sacred and eternal you are only turning the other way; when you look back you will see the shadow still there on your sleeve.

Each war draws you nearer the void of abstraction, further from your silly, flushed, busy days. Our childish grandfathers rang bells at Christmas and prayed, they had whiskers and gold watch-chains across their waistcoats, but now their familiar places are empty, we are no longer allowed the folly of believing.

If I dreamed of impossible women at night, in my soldier's exile from love, then so did the other, and the other also, and the other. Look into yourself and you find me. That is the lesson of the democratic war.

I tried to prolong my childhood, the smiling years of truancy. Indeed, I rebelled again and again against my fate as a soldier. Those rebellions were always unsuccessful. It was as if they were expected and waited for, being the customary last agonies of the dying child.

My last rebellion took place in December, 1944, four months after I had been landed at Salerno. I flew into sudden rages, I spoke bitterly, I fixed the people above me with hard stares, and I tried to show everybody that punishment meant nothing to me. I walked about moodily with my hands in my pockets,

PART TWO

and only with my close friends, in the command post, did I talk sincerely. My laughter gradually ceased and my brow began to wear a more thoughtful and scholarly look as the weather became colder and it was necessary to fight in the mountains above the River Garigliano.

A few days before Christmas I was sent up to a mountain range overlooking this river from the south. There I trudged with my signallers from village to village on the snowy heights, behind the infantry battalion to which I had been assigned. All of us had wireless-sets or batteries slung over our shoulders. We climbed up the mountain-paths bent forward like slaves. The loaded donkeys stumbled between the boulders, going before us. At the top there was always to be found a desolate place, grey from past battles, where there were no houses and few trees. Our clothes were no protection against the cold, and at night we huddled up together in an airless bivouac among the rocks. I did not know which of the infantry commanders I should be supporting. I did not know where the Enemy was. I did not know what tasks were expected of me. No one consulted me. No one, after the tactical conferences, told me what was happening along the rest of the front. We moved from one gloomy farmhouse in the snow to another, along frozen paths, apparently for no purpose, since there was never any fighting or rifle-shots or bombardments. The rations we had brought up from the valley behind us were not sufficient, and the wind came in like a dart from the sea. I hardly spoke to my signallers. But one morning on our way up the side of a mountain I turned and saw them all

OF SINS AND WINTER

straggling far behind me, so I shouted down, "Get a move on!" One of them, the tallest, stung by my cry, began leaping up towards the crest like an animal, running with his body doubled up, the heavy wireless-set on his back swinging about, until he had passed me. The other signallers were encouraged by this and also began running, until I, weak and panting, was the last of them all. Now I wanted to shout at them again, to tell them that they must always be behind their leader. . . . But I stopped myself speaking.

At the top I had another fit of embittered fury when I saw the legs of a dead German sticking out of the earth. The sight made me furious against the infantrymen, against these mountains, against the Germans, against the War, against authority wherever it was.

On Christmas Eve, when the day was particularly dark and muffled by the soft grey snow-clouds just overhead, a Protestant service was held in the kitchen of one of the farmhouses, and carols were sung. I went along happily, hoping to be reminded of a truancy. But, instead, I found the singing coarse and dismal, the padre's sermon idiotic, and the cheering words of the colonel a lot of empty chit-chat. I left the kitchen frowning and stamping with my feet, and I decided that I would leave these mutton-heads today, I would go back to the valley, no matter if it meant fifty courts-martial. Time and time again I had asked over the wireless to be relieved before Christmas Day. I *must* be back at the command post on Christmas Day, because of the good food and drink which only came once a year and which might

PART TWO

be the last I could enjoy before my death. I was bored, cold, idle and, worst of all, quite alone with my signallers among these infantrymen, none of whom I knew or cared about. I must have Christmas in the tents with my own people south of Cassino, with tinned turkey, letters from England, whisky and port in the evening, and many hours smoking over the command post fire. I would no longer bear this senseless, inconsiderate waste of myself. For the last three days I had not washed or shaved, just as an act of rebellion. I had slipped among the boulders, torn my clothes, fallen in the black mud, cut myself, had a shell-splinter pierce my trousers, and I refused, out of hot vindictive anger, to make myself any better. I would go back to the tents like this, with four days' growth of beard and mud all over my face, my clothes torn and black. I intended to walk into one of the command posts and tell them in a loud voice that for the last week I had been trying to get some sense out of them as to what my tasks were, why I was with the infantry at all, and where the Enemy was: and they had not troubled to give me answers over the wireless.

I ordered my men to pack up their wireless-sets and without a word to the infantry commander I left the mountains.

When I arrived, five hours later, at the tents, I began to walk in a slovenly manner, my beret all awry, my map-case dangling at my side. My men followed all my moods to a detail, and most of the way down from the peaks they had been grumbling in low voices about the way in which their regiment had been treating them.

OF SINS AND WINTER

The officer who saw me first was the man responsible for sending me out in the first place. The sight of me strolling between the tents astonished him. He stopped in his tracks as I drew nearer, fixing him with a defiant stare.

"What on earth are you doing here?" he asked.

Then, when he saw my muddy face and torn clothes, he began to smile. He had the gift of always appearing mature and sensible, though he was little older than I was. I think he looked on me as something of a joke, a child.

"What's the matter with your face?" he asked. "Wasn't there any water up there?"

Because of the look in his eyes I began to feel a terrible shame, and a blush came quickly into my face. That is to say, I did not really wish to rebel.

He added with a shrug, just as he was passing on: "Oh, well, another party will have to relieve you, I suppose."

I stood quite still. I knew now that my truancy was over, and that I must submit patiently to the novice's training, a routine of mounting terror. From that moment I decided to put away self-pity: for had I not signed my name willingly, so to speak, on the bonds of crucifixion?

Early this morning I went down to a café at the end of the Stein Gasse and sat looking out into the street at the people passing by, most of them wrapped up under the rain, their heads down. The rain brought memories. I cannot shake them off. I shall only feel free if I yield them, bit by bit. The air is heavy with

PART TWO

murder. I am like a man who sees blood on everybody's hand.

I remember how at Monte Cerasola a group of men stopped along the white mountain path and stared at me with horror. I particularly remember the horror in their eyes as they stared at me, refusing to believe in my existence. Among these peaks there were legions of ghosts. One of the men said, "But we saw you lying dead lower down by the path. We were sure it was you. And they reported you dead."

Monte Cerasola is listening in my flesh because it was the scene of my first helpless capitulation to terror.

It is the third week of June. I left Salzburg yesterday, travelling eastwards on one of the local lines. Salzburg is for me the Museum: for that was the revelation it yielded me. It is a hot, calm evening, so much in contrast to the bitter and grudging spring in Bleitnau. The fields were like England when I looked out of the window of the train. There were meadows, shaded and flat, with trees by fences, and the grass harvest was beginning. I hated the iron mountains at Bleitnau, but here I am drawing near to the country where I used to ride through the fir-woods each morning at dawn. After dark last night the train stopped at a railway station near the lake, which was tiny and silent, with a lawn, trees and an inn close by.

I saw that I was close to the edge of the water, among rushes. And on the other side of the water I saw lights. This is Mondsee, lake of the moon. I am

OF SINS AND WINTER

glad to be far from the Museum, amid water and soft fields again.

My skin is now used to the sun and today I took a rowing boat across the lake and rubbed oil into my back. The sun burned quickly because there was a light wind down from the mountains and one did not sweat. I rowed close to the edge of the lake and looked at the huts, at the boating yards, the lawns and flowers in front of the farmhouses, and the steep corn-fields behind them. I heard laughter from the shore, and a few minutes later, after floating past one of the wooden piers, I saw people bathing. I watched the strong young men at the edge of the lake turning this way and that to catch the sun in the proper places, then staring down at their skins, loving their own darkness. There were also those on the shore whose skins were white and new to the sun, and they were a little ashamed, biding their time quietly on the outer verges. One of the dark young men had very black hair, and I noticed that he had a touch of henna on each side; a touch of it. He moved slowly, his head high, celebrating himself as he moved, and easy in all his limbs. He loved himself, he cherished his own footsteps and nothing of his grace was lost to him.

I lay along the bottom of the boat and heard the slight waves quietly hitting the sides. I lay with my eyes closed and became browner.

But I am aware, again and again, of a terrible whiteness, a ghostly pallor which might one day spread over everything on the earth, a pallor born of murder. Both at Cerasola and at Cassino there was whiteness, almost anæsthetic: the air is keener where there is no living soul.

PART TWO

At Cerasola I brought my signallers away from the path and we found a tall boulder behind which we could sleep, protected against the shells. It had been raining since morning, and it was winter. We were frozen, sodden to the skin, and our clothes were quite useless in the icy wind, so we stripped naked and huddled close together, five of us, under two blankets through which the water streamed like a shallow brook. The mountain-water streamed down our shoulders through the bed, but strangely we became warm, and slept. At dawn we saw that we were half-way up a slope, overlooking a flat ravine. And in this flat ravine there was a Red Cross tent for the wounded.

We wrung out our clothes and put them on again bitterly. We were staring and silly, and we sat down to rest in the sharp, freezing wind.

A bombardment started, but we did not even move or raise our eyes as the mortar-bombs came swinging down from the crest behind us. We simply sat watching the flat ravine below where most of the explosions were. We watched the Red Cross tent. We heard one of the wounded inside cry out. It was the ordinary cry, "*Stop, oh, stop, please, stop!*" We saw the shells fall close and then close again to the tent. We watched a man run out of the tent and look quickly about, crouched down. He must have left the wounded man. He ran from one side of the ravine to the other like a madman, with the wounded man still calling out in the tent. He ran from boulder to boulder, and the shells laughed and splashed and coughed all about him. We watched this in silence, our eyes half-open. We were watching the ravine

OF SINS AND WINTER

with pleasure. On the side of a very steep mountain it was always fairly safe. We were safe, and yet at the same time we were only a short distance from the tent, not more than fifty yards, which made our pleasure at being safe all the greater. It was a base capitulation: we were sick cowards, hollowed out, shivering. We listened almost warmly to the wounded man's cry. Our teeth chattered and we stared, and our bodies were thankful for this bombardment.

Then, during the lull, I beckoned to my ghosts, and we took up our packs and our wireless apparatus, standing very stiffly so that our sodden clothes should move as little as possible against our skins.

But one of our number stayed. We turned suddenly, the rest of us, and saw him sitting there. He could not put on his boots.

"I have frost bite," he said. "I shall go back."

I smiled like a fool, thin and pale in my hanging clothes, and I pleaded with him: "Be good and come."

But the child shook his head and walked in his bare feet down to the ravine, where the path towards the artillery lines began, and we were speechless and silly. Cerasola was white. It had legions of white ghosts. This was because we were starving, and all things real became ghostly, and the mountain pebbles shone blinding in the light.

This evening a St. John's fire was lit at the lake-side to celebrate the summer solstice. It was lit at dusk, and other fires could be seen burning on the hills on the other side of the water. These fires are for the burning away of sins and winter, and for the blessing of the summer harvest. A procession of boys

PART TWO

and girls, led by the town band, came down the avenue of lime-trees, and the bonfire was ready for them at the edge of the lake, and also two effigies stuffed with straw. There was a little praying and singing, then the fire was lit. A young man pushed a brand underneath it and jumped aside. It blazed right up between the sleeping trees and the crowd sighed in the evening and saw the shooting sparks carry their sins away. Motor-boats floated in from the lake, their engines shut off, to watch the ceremony, and there were also people in row-boats, leaning over their oars on the dark water.

The boys of the choir lit brands and held them up so that the musicians could see their music. And now the dancers came into view, all of them young men. They performed a fighting dance. They made a circle and slowly menaced each other with their eyes, craning their necks forward, then they jumped towards each other and began slapping each other loudly on the head in time to the music. Behind me in the crowd a man explained to his wife with a chuckle that they were not really slapping each other, they do it by clapping their hands at the right time, and they are so clever, they are so fast, that you do not notice them do this. . . .

I made my bed of pebbles among the legions of white ghosts, scooping out the stones to make a place like the bottom of a bath for my blanket. Then I took my ground-sheet and laid it down, a thin old man in my folly, my hands trembling and gaunt as they used the heavy stones to stop it flapping, an old fool alone in his burrow piling his silly stones, beyond the serious things of life. And I watched the shivering

OF SINS AND WINTER

old man at my side, a year younger than myself, who was now twenty-one.

Shells fell, but then they were not German shells, and someone touched me on the shoulder. In everything I failed. The ghosts blinded me. I was the very plaything of terror. He said to me, "These are your guns," and I heard the other men grumbling behind the wall of my handmade house, asking if Jerry was not enough without their own fellows. . . . The splinters hit my wall, and I took up the mouthpiece of my wireless and said, "Stop firing, stop firing." But the shells ran their ordained length because the wireless was dead.

At the gun-position where these shells were fired it was different. The shells were long, round, coloured and pointed objects. They did not sing like boys, they did not lodge in flesh. They were inserted into the breech and pushed home with a rod. Men worked in shifts of three, unless it was a very busy night, when all six gunners would be at their posts. The gun fired and shook, then the pointed shell went whispering off into the night, climbing.

I remember how at Cerasola I passed a German prisoner coming along one of the mountain paths. I stopped to let him pass, because the path was narrow. He was young. He was wet and exhausted. I stared rudely into his face as he passed. I gathered the saliva in my mouth ready to spit at him, but swallowed it again. I tried to make my eyes as hard as possible, and I saw him flinch back from my gaze. I looked into his eyes, drilling and drilling into him, blaming him for the shells which hit the boulders, for the pebbles near the peaks which yielded under

PART TWO

the feet like beaches, for the lack of food and fires in the English lines, for the decimation of English troops day after day in a battle for ground it was useless to win, and for the absence of cover from the sky. I wished to lay this at his door, and I told him this in my stare. I hated with my gaze. It was the first time I had looked at a man in this way, and I now knew that the child had been raised up and that I could not turn back. And I was conscious of having committed a foulness, because the boy flinched and turned away.

You cannot make an abstraction real. I could not realise the Enemy in this fair-haired boy, nor could I get an answer back from the fine, round, frightened eyes.

For the truth was that I had failed as a scholar of war, and I could not forgive myself for this. I made one green attempt at heroism, the empty gesture of a novice, when a tall signaller said to me in a terrified voice, "I can't go along that path." In the early afternoon it had begun once more to rain, and the Guardsmen stood about in a dreadful white hollow under the mountain buckling on their belts and ammunition pouches. Then we moved forward, in single file, into the thick of the shells along the narrow path. We crouched, tried to draw in closer to the uncaring mountain-side. Suddenly my signaller ran off the path to a tree nearby and lay there, trembling.

I followed him down and shook him by the shoulders. He was very pale, and the skin of his face seemed strangely loose, for his terror was an astonishing discovery to him.

OF SINS AND WINTER

I pulled him to his feet with a show of brutality. He was *my terror*; I was dominating myself. I think I was frowning as I took him by the belt and drew him nearer to me. His head was bent forward. His body was without will, and I could pull it about as I wished. I unbuttoned my revolver-case, took out my charged revolver and showed it to him at the end of the white lanyard, with my chin up, looking at him as though I despised him. I laid the weapon in the palm of my hand and looked into his eyes, showing it to him very privately, with my back turned to the other soldiers on the path. I kept hold of him and murmured at last, "You're going to follow me. Do you understand that?"

I looked him calmly in the eyes, my chin up, and told him to come away from the tree. The hidden oracle was failing to speak to me, giving me no signs, and I wanted to delay joining the silent Guardsmen in their slow walk towards the peak called Cerasola. I wanted him to refuse because I myself was useless without him. It gave me an excuse to stay behind. I could point to him and say, "He is my wireless signaller. I am no use without him. His cowardice held me up." That would be an answer to the cold magisterial gaze of the inward scholar of murder, on his daily round of soul-recruitment.

I was no use to the infantry. I merely hung back with my men under the shelter of boulders. I gave help only when it was asked for. I had advanced only as far as the *credo* of battle, "I believe in the flowing of blood and the screaming of men. I believe in the death of children." But that was not enough.

When I came back from this expedition to the

PART TWO

guns I sat outside the command post drumming my fingers on my knee for hours on end. I think it was a smiling spring day, and the River Garigliano was grey-still in the sunlight, skirted by soft lawns. That night I went very unwillingly to my bed in the bivouac. It lay between two hillocks, hidden from the guns. I was always most careful in choosing a site for my bivouac wherever we went. I would consult my hidden oracle and bide my time, going from the shelter of trees to the shelter of a hillock, from high ground to low, until at last the oracle spoke and gave me the place of safety.

There was little risk of being bombarded here by the Enemy, for they could not get their heavy guns into the mountains. But perhaps long-range guns could reach this place from the right flank, and this idea came to me again and again as the night grew round my bivouac. I began to wait for that faintest whispering in the sky and then the sudden rush and the black fountain of earth. The command post was in a kind of wayside temple, and it was warm, full of people. But I was fifty yards from it. I could hear nothing. Most of the gun-crews were asleep. There was no machine-gunning in the mountains, nor the distant falling of mortar-bombs, nor the sound of vehicles on the road, nor the low, tranquil talking of men close by.

I pulled up my blankets and turned out the battery-light at my side. If I raised myself up on my elbows I could see no glow of cigarettes in the darkness, nor the sudden flash of a torch, nor the beacon used by the guns as a point of reference by night. I was utterly alone, and doomed as I closed my eyes.

OF SINS AND WINTER

The terror mounted in me slowly. I started at the slightest sound, sweating, and sometimes the cunning breeze made the faintest of mock whisperings in the sky. I waited for the fatal shell because I had never before been so certain of its coming. For I expected to be punished by the tribunal of murder for my failures on the mountain-peak.

Again and again I decided to get up and return to the command post, but did nothing. Still I lay with my mouth open, absolutely still and tense, under the frail bivouac. Once, soon after three o'clock, I pushed the damp blankets aside and began to dress. But I fell back again, knowing the folly of my terror and not wishing to give way. Then again I began the agonising rehearsal for my death, when all my flesh seemed to feel the first moment of that fatal obliteration.

But the light of the dawn brought solace, a golden blessing from the watered green valley. I looked up suddenly and saw it through the exit-flap, shining beyond the mountains, promising another spring-day.

My mood at once changed. I got up angry. What terrible fate had put me among the brain-creatures, with their courage, their self-scrutiny and their little premeditations, their horrible genius for deciding between right and wrong? I was infected. The worm had entered. I wanted to be among creatures who killed and could forget, who loved and could forget, who made a fatal error and could forget; but not among those whose sleepless minds limped after them in the shadows, preying on them with ceaseless questions, menacing them with phantoms. I would

PART TWO

not be one of those whose minds were talking all the time, who spewed themselves out down a sink-hole of words and self-questionings, who talked love but would not make it, who talked crime but would not with their own hands commit it, who talked prowess and did not have it, who talked decisions but could not take them.

I had come into the War, which otherwise meant nothing to me, in order to fling off the dread brain-creatures, only to find that I was in a very nest of them, that they infested the darkest places, down even to where a man shed blood, alone with God. They would not permit God a single glance on to the earth.

During these few moments soon after dawn the novice died. I determined now to pitch all my will against the ravages of terror, and to become a worthy scholar of war. I wanted to be able to say that I had met my epoch half-way, without flinching.

But a week later we were taken out of the line and moved to Egypt for a rest. It was during the second part of our fighting in Italy, when we had returned from Egypt, that I tried to master as far as I could the subtle scholarship of abstract murder.

At Cassino it was a whiteness that could be seen.

I drove into Cassino during the summer of 1944, a few days after we had returned from Egypt for our second operation. While we had been away the line had moved north of Rome, far beyond this ruined valley.

At the end of the road from the south lay a huge

OF SINS AND WINTER

white grotto, white as a great shroud on the side of the mountain, a cancerous heap wide open to the sky. I was alone, and the evening was hot and still.

This baptismal place belonged to other men; I had never fought here. Therefore I felt I should not have come. I was an intruder, on a grim necrophiliac tour.

I drove my car into the white open light of the grotto, and I became a member of its terrible silence the moment I shut the engine off. I climbed down from my seat, and the only other being in the town was an Italian girl filling her hand-cart with belongings, throwing them down bitterly and coldly. She glanced at me once, very quickly, out of dumb, black curiosity. She did not forgive me with her eyes.

I stood in the midst of this winding sheet, and no tree was in sight, no bird sang; there were only white stone, green pools and the eyes of the dead in every corner.

I looked ahead at Monastery Hill, then I turned and saw the brown Monte Cairo watching me. All things watched me here in the evening, watched my mocking visit. A huge white pall of silence lay over the town. Each of my footsteps sounded from end to end. The silence quickly engulfed every sound, drew it at once into eternity. I turned and nothing was there. I walked on, and the silent eyes followed me. I turned again, and again there was nothing there.

I looked in at the dark entrances to the cellars under the rubble, and the chairs were still there, with bayonet-scabbards, tin-hats and old tins. Aeroplanes had bombed this town into ruins and then had bombed the ruins and repeated this again. Soldiers from both sides had patrolled along the lanes of

PART TWO

rubble by night from cellar to cellar, and they had touched each other in the dark.

I saw two wooden crosses in a green pool, then a chalked notice hanging from a broken column, *Hotel Continental*. I smelled the quicklime sprinkled everywhere, rendering dust to dust.

Alone in this grotto I was a child, naked and frightened. There were matters here I could not grasp for the reason that I was alive. My fingers were warm, I could walk, and therefore I was more alone than I had ever been before. Only ghosts were the inmates here. It was a masterpiece of the embalmers, their perfect grotto, their lovely end for men, a Museum of war.

On my way back I saw torn blankets in the fields, among pebbles, and ammunition crates, and also little stone homes which gaunt and trembling old men had made.

I was healthy and strong again, after Egypt. My terror at Cerasola seemed a great distance from me. But I knew that I must enter the countries of terror for a second time, and suffer once more, in trenches and behind farmhouse windows, the nightly intimations of death.

Above all, I knew I could no longer allow myself the mistakes of a novice. I was determined now to put into effect all I had learned in the south, during the first part of our operations.

Here in Mondsee I have a wide double room with two windows. There is a couch with scarlet cushions, a dark, locked dresser with lace covers and blue

OF SINS AND WINTER

china bowls, an immense polished stove reaching to the ceiling, and even during the day it is dark in this room, quite adrift from the world. I seldom hear noises from outside. Sometimes there are hours together of utter silence in this warm, gaudy, soft place. This will make my voyage the easier.

Sometimes I look out of my windows at the cobbled yard below. I watch the dove-cot opposite with the white, modest doves at whom we dare look, and the barn where two brewers' lorries and a cart painted green and red are kept. Sometimes horses come into this yard to be shod, and I hear their slow, hot sighing. On Sundays, if it is fine, the tables are taken out into this yard, and guests eat there.

While I am in this room I shall describe the slow advance of the scholar of war towards that moment of heroism in 1944 when my acting abilities were at their height. That moment of heroism was a dramatic and quite deliberate choice on my part. It was the crisp judgement of the practised scholar, and in no way connected with courage.

Part 3

I CLIMBED the hill with the forward platoon between the sunlit trees, through the long, sun-flecked grasses, in the very cradle of sleepy summer, when I did not fear to die. We went crouching from tree to tree, stooping when one of the rifles or the machine-guns spoke from out of the Enemy at the top. We climbed sideways, and at last we saw the shell-proof monster with a pout—Castel Poggiolo.

Once across the open grasses, we began running for the farmhouse through the orchard, in the last, foolish heat of summer. Everything was swelling and rich, in bounty and bright—the fruit stored in the loft, the grain over the floor downstairs, the sacks of barley, the maize, the huge onions, the gaudy aubergines, the donkey-panniers of potatoes, the shrivelled grapes, the stained prodigal wooden wine-press, and the neglected urns of milk. We crowded through the door, through the hot, thick autumn smells, unseen by the Enemy, and took up positions in the dark places behind the windows, treading quietly.

I went up the narrow wooden steps to the loft with the Major, and a man with a machine-gun came behind us. We stood together in the shadows behind the window, excited and waiting for a sign. The man laid the machine-gun on the table in front of us, and placed it on its tripod. He then fixed on the magazine of ammunition.

OF SINS AND WINTER

The Major went to the other side of the window and crouched down. Very slowly, as the other men watched him in silence, he moved his hand along the ledge until it touched the wooden frame of the window. He then began pulling the window open, but very slowly, a half-inch at a time. I pushed the muzzle of the machine-gun forward and sighted it on to the farmhouse farther up.

We stood leaning on the table in the darkness, anxious for our fleshy victims. In front of us there rose a field of thick, tall grass, and at the crest of the hill lay the farmhouse, quiet among trees, with the pouting castle behind it, on a separate, higher hill.

The Major told the corporal behind him to take out a small patrol.

"We will give you covering fire from here," he said.

The men assembled downstairs. They left the house by the back, through the orchard. I heard them step swiftly across the gravel path, then come round to the front, intending to take the Enemy in one rush straight uphill.

At once the Enemy spoke. There was machine-gun fire from above. The Major jumped towards the gun on the table. The Enemy's bullets were tracer-bullets, like swift, straight, floating red flames. I shuddered at the Major through the noise. The red flames were coming from a trench at the top of the hill. It would be sand-bagged and difficult to winkle out. The Major crouched down behind the gun, trembling with joy and excitement, and pulled the trigger, spraying his bullets wildly over the rising field in front of us.

PART THREE

I began dancing up and down with impatience. I was passionate to have hold of the trigger, to pull it over to the right spot.

"No, no, no!" I shouted. "Use tracer!"

The disadvantage of tracer-bullets was that their point of origin could be seen; but the advantage was that their point of arrival could be seen. All we could see from the Major's bullets was a brief and tiny fountain of earth, now and then. The Major nodded and kept his finger firm on the trigger, shaking with the rhythms of his gun, staring before him, hardly following the direction of his bullets, for his eyes were so glazed.

"Yes!" he called out. "Get me the tracer! I'm going to have this bastard."

But the trench continued to fire back. The bullets hit the front of our farmhouse and smashed the glass of the window at my side. We were all jumping up and down with excitement, crying out to the Major like merry children. "No, more to the left! Down a bit! That's where they are. Give them a nice burst now!"

Men rushed up the stairs to the loft with the new magazines of tracer bullets. The Major tore out the old magazine and threw it to the floor, but he took several seconds to fix the new one in because his hands were shaking, and the more he pushed it down the harder it wedged.

When it was home he crouched down to his work again. This time there came from his muzzle a long dotted line of red flames. I tried to push him aside when I saw how wide of the target these bullets were going. The red bullets swerved and pulled back and then rushed forward absurdly as he lurched over the

OF SINS AND WINTER

table in his excitement, swearing and heaving, the sweat pouring down his face.

"Let me have it!" I cried.

The Major flung his foot out backwards to get me in the shins, and grasped another magazine to feed his gun.

We all saw a man's hand, then an arm, briefly, at the edge of the trench, probably taking more ammunition from the side. It was now quite clear where the Enemy lay, and the Major sighted his barrel precisely on the spot and fired again. I wanted to send line after line of red bullet over the field in a great beneficent shower.

The Major threw down the last magazine that could be spared and shrugged his shoulders with a smile, moving away from the window.

"I can't get him," he said.

We went downstairs and smoked, waiting for the tank to come up from the road below and with only two or three cannon shells dispose of the trench.

When it came it fired only one cannon shell into the field, shooting up the earth in a great black fountain, and instantly two men jumped out, covered with soil, their hands up, alive and surrendering. The Major shrugged his shoulders and told his men to get ready to occupy the farmhouse at the top of the hill, now that the German rearguard had been taken.

We went up to this house a section at a time, running swiftly from tree to tree, knowing that we were now being observed from the huge, grey castle on the crest. This crest was so fine that the castle appeared to be surrounded by a deep, impregnable moat. Behind the black slits in the castle's side would

PART THREE

be men watching. Our farmhouse at the top was easy game for them.

The tank commander insisted on bringing up his tank as well, which would probably draw a bombardment of very heavy shells on to us. People argued with him, telling him to keep the thing farther back, down the hill, but he was a swaggering, facile young man, trying to cut a fine figure. He smiled and kept his jaw square, flaunting his calm. Until now no heavy shells had fallen, and this farmhouse had lain in its quiet garden undisturbed.

Inside it was very dark, the windows being small. The entire company crowded into this house. Every room was full of men, and also the stairs and cellars.

The Major walked from room to room, worried.

"We are going to pay for this," he said.

For it was one of the rules of defence in battle that men should not be allowed to crowd together under one small roof, but disperse into sections, digging their trenches outside at intervals from each other so that if a shell did fall on the house it would involve few casualties. But men loved to crowd together under a farmhouse roof, however illusory its safety, and the Major did not have the heart to stop them. Also, if one had to die, it was easier to await death in a room than outside under the fathomless sky.

So the Major put his headquarters in the dark kitchen and stationed his machine-gunner behind the narrow window with iron bars, pointing his muzzle towards the castle. He did not even have the heart to put out sentries. They would have no time to dig deep trenches, and without these they would not

OF SINS AND WINTER

stand a chance against the shells. All the men knew that this house was easy game, and they were waiting in the shadows, pale and silent, caught together like beasts, watching the Major and hoping for their reprieve, for a withdrawal to the autumnal farmhouse with the kind smells. The tank commander was leaning out of the window at the top of the stairs, staring at the castle-wall saucily. The men on the stairs were grumbling at him, but he took this for a sort of slovenly cowardice. He would bring in the more courageous machine-spirit, and his tank would answer for everything.

The men in the upper rooms had laid out their beds. I stepped across their silent bodies and told my signaller to put his wireless by the window. It was astonishing how quiet the men in the room were. No doubt they were tired, but also they were waiting for the battle to begin, dully. They could have no part in this battle, only receive it. I heard them breathing, they were so quiet. It was as if they had grown cynical, believing in nothing but the coming of accurate shells. They watched everything dimly from their beds, taking no notice of the excited voices below.

I sat down at the radio and, once the tuffing signals were over, passed a message through, giving my position on the map. I had the great rubber earphones clasped over my ears, so that I could not hear the bombardment when it began. The men lying to one side of me did not stir. Suddenly I was thrown from my chair by a swift hot blast from outside the window, from below. I quickly tore off my earphones and looked out. I saw, from the trailing blue smoke,

PART THREE

that the shell had landed just to one side of the tank immediately below.

"Well, that's only the first," I said.

None of the men on the floor answered me. I began to hate their passive cynicism; they were so horribly certain in their knowledge of death. I pushed across their bodies roughly and kicked one of them who did not move fast enough. They all knew that this first shell was a registration-shell: it would be observed, another would probably follow, perhaps another, then, the target having been fixed, the bombardment would begin in earnest.

I ran into the dark kitchen, where the men were grumbling round the windows, waiting with their rifles cocked, in case the Enemy suddenly popped over the crest in front of them.

There was a yellow haystack in front of the house, and at its side a great barn, which meant that any patrol coming from the Enemy lines would be well hidden, especially as there were no sentries outside to give warning. Just as I looked at the Major the shells began to fall. The men in the corridor above came scrambling down the stairs, making a great, blind clatter, crowding into the dark kitchen. But the Major shouted, "Get out, you bastards!"

Two shells fell in awful crashes behind us, and the men in the other rooms began shouting. They wanted to get out. They wanted to know why they were being cooped up here. They wanted to get at the bastards with their hands.

"Where's that tank commander?" I asked. "I just want to see his face."

The fatal, pungent smell of cordite came through

OF SINS AND WINTER

the open windows. I began running up the stairs, into the other room, and down again, asking everybody where the tank commander was.

The men at the window of the kitchen wanted to use their rifles, to shoot at anything. They were shifting about restlessly, itching to pull their triggers. But they would have to wait until nightfall before they could attack the castle.

I found the young man near one of the wireless-sets downstairs, and it gave me great relief to see his face now subdued and pale, and the thoughtful look of the war-scholar on it at last. Was my own face like his at first, when I arrived at Salerno? Did I swagger in this city-fashion, and square my coddled jaw?

It was a house crawling with resentful men, like a thing black and vital with maggots. They pushed past each other on the stairs and jostled about in the rooms, as if continually moving round would save them from the castle's evil eye. The Major kept coming to the door of the kitchen amid the deafening bursts and shrieking out, "What the bloody hell's going on here? What's the matter?" The men took no notice of him, but went on with their frantic and sightless peregrinations, stumbling away from the great phantom of death which loomed closer over the house. During the pauses between the shells it was possible to hear a heavy, creaking noise from the stairs and the wooden floor above as they moved about.

The tall haystack in front of the house caught fire. I had turned to look at the men who were crowding together at the foot of the stairs, and just at that moment the room became lit up with a great yellow

PART THREE

light, and a sharp crackling noise sounded from outside. I fell back against the wall, pushed by the men who were drawing back from the blinding heat at the window.

"Shoot, for Christ's sake! Go on, fire into the flames."

"Jerry's there! Shoot!"

The Bren gunner suddenly fired a burst into the flames. The Major ran forward from the back of the room, pushing the other men aside.

"What's there?" he cried. "What have you seen? What are you shooting at?"

"Look!"

One of the riflemen pointed, and at once the Bren gunner, fierce with the trigger under his hand, lowered his back and fired another quick burst. There had been movement, so somebody said. Then a figure ran out of the very midst of the flames. The gunner was just about to fire again when everybody saw that this was a girl with long black hair. She came from out of the flames screaming, and stood between the house and the haystack, unable to go forward or back for terror.

"Come in! Come in!" the men shouted at her, and licence began to mingle a little with death.

But she stood near the haystack, holding her head with her hands, aghast and shrieking. When the centre of the haystack began slowly to tumble in two more figures dashed out from beneath, an old man and a small boy, then came the rest of the family, frantic, dancing about on the same spot, hearing the queer English cries from inside the house, like cries for blood, "Come in, you fools! Come in! *Venite qui,*

OF SINS AND WINTER

venite qui!" And at last the old man took the lead and ran like a swift beast down the hill to the left and out of sight, farther into the English line, and, as the shells began to fall again, with the same quick screech, for probably the German observer could see this confused movement amid the flames and was playing his game of smoke-puffs, the rest of the family followed, the children calling out for their parents as they ran.

Everybody was talking about it nervously while the flames continued to burn. The word went round upstairs, and no one could keep still. One or two tried to laugh. The Major was trembling, while he examined his map. The Bren gunner had left the muzzle of his weapon at an angle, pointing up at the sky. It was almost dark outside now, and faces at the window were lighted by the flames.

Two hours later the main patrol went out stealthily, in slippers, with their faces blacked and scarves wound round their heads. They said nothing to each other at the foot of the stairs. They skirted the smouldering haystack and went down into the moat-valley under the castle. Then they crept through the grass to the vast wooden door, which was the only way out of the castle. They crawled up from the moat and lay down, with a few yards between each man, at the edge of the gravel clearing in front of the door. They formed a rough semi-circle. They waited in the hush. The door was tight closed. It remained closed for the next three hours, until almost midnight.

Then one of the Germans came out and strolled towards the bushes, to pass water. He had left the great door ajar behind him. Five men of the section

PART THREE

rose and crept towards this door. They stood up close together under the shadow of the wall, the first one with his hand on the door-chain, so that it could not be pulled back. Two other men, nearer the bushes, went silently up behind the German, one in front of him and the other behind. They waited until he finished passing water and began buttoning himself up. Just as he turned they leapt forward. One of them struck him a blow over the back of the head. He gasped with astonishment and stood for a moment erect, his eyes staring before him, appearing to turn as if he were looking for someone, then he collapsed on to the gravel path. The five men behind the door went into the dark cavernous entrance. They tiptoed along the stone corridor until they reached the first lighted room. There were several of the Enemy playing cards. Two of the Englishmen ran forward and pointed the muzzles of their Tommy-guns into their faces, and after ten minutes the great castle was taken. One or two more Germans were surprised in the upper rooms, but otherwise the castle was empty. The prisoners were put into one of the dungeon-like rooms near the gate, robbed of their money and valuables, then left to await the departure of the ration-party, who would take them to the rear.

I took no part in this patrol. The section told me about it afterwards. I waited behind in the farmhouse until the moment the castle was taken. I was exhausted, and happy. For I was aware of having achieved a kind of victory. I had kept my technical capacities even in the presence of terror: that is to say, I had brought down fire on essential targets even during the bombardments. I felt that the novice had

OF SINS AND WINTER

at last given way to the scholar of war. I was learning a certain detachment both from the sufferings of other people and my own.

But the events of the following day proved my confidence to be wrong, and I was guilty of an act of betrayal of which I had not thought myself capable.

It happened the next evening, when we moved beyond the huge castle into the valley. At dusk I set out from headquarters to find the infantry company I had been ordered to support. An attack was timed for eight o'clock, about three hours later, and I must be with the infantry company before that time.

I took only one signaller with me, a small man with a thin moustache, the most loyal signaller I had.

We went down into the valley and saw our path stretching clearly before us in the dusk. But when we had been walking for half an hour and the darkness came, without moon, we could no longer make it out and began stumbling through long grass and between trees. After a time we came to a clearing, with a farmhouse just beyond it. There I decided to ask the way, for I was sure that we were still behind the English lines.

The windows of the farmhouse were dark, but I could hear voices inside, so I knocked on the door. A man came, treading quietly, and when he had walked out into the yard I asked him where the nearest English troops were. He seemed frightened by my sudden appearance. He shrugged and said he thought they were a mile or so farther forward, then he pointed vaguely towards the back of the house. I

PART THREE

asked whether he could be certain of that, and he answered, "Fairly." So I told him to put on a coat and lead us to the place. At once he tried to refuse, drawing back towards the door, but I put my foot against it and insisted. I stood over him, quite silent, while he put a kind of cloak over his shoulders, and the three of us set off across the valley.

We walked for a long time side by side, mostly uphill. The signaller and I had now lost our bearings entirely. We only had a vague sense of going towards the Enemy line. The Italian said nothing all the way, but took long agile strides between us, staring at the ground. The valley was still in silence, for the attack was not due for some time. At all costs we had to avoid being in front of the English lines when the moment came for this attack to begin.

We reached the top of a hill and there, at the edge of a gravel path, our Italian guide stopped. He pointed forward in the darkness to what appeared to be a large white house with a drive and a main gate. But it was difficult to see. We were only aware of something large and white. I peered to see whether there were any vehicles I could recognise, but there was only this white shape. There was no noise from inside the house. There were no whistling sounds from wireless-sets inside. Only the breeze every now and then slightly stirred the trees and bushes on either side of the path. When we had come up on to this path our boots had made a loud scratching noise on the gravel. But now, so much aware of the silence, we stood quite still. We listened, but still no sound came from the house. The Italian kept nodding his head and saying, "Yes, it's here. *Inglese!*"

OF SINS AND WINTER

But suddenly we heard a voice. It came from the direction of the house. At first we thought it was an English voice, and we listened for it again. Then we heard the same voice shout, "*Halt!*" but with the German pronunciation, and I at once caught hold of the Italian's sleeve and whispered, hardly able to breathe: "You've brought us to the Boche position!"

The German sentry was standing perhaps twenty yards away, near the gate of the house, in the darkness. We had not made sufficient noise for him to have a target. For a moment longer we stood together, silent and staring. Then suddenly the Italian broke free from me and like a swift quiet deer leapt down off the path into the shrubbery. I turned panic-stricken, expecting the sentry to open fire at once when he heard the scuffling, then I also began running. I ran down the gravel path in the opposite direction to the voice. I kept wondering why he did not fire. I ran along a grass verge so as to make no noise and as I ran I saw at my feet notices marked with a skull-and-crossbones and the word *MINEN* in luminous paint. Behind me I could hear my signaller appealing to me, "Help me, help me," but I ran on in a long, panic-stricken stride, determined to get out of range, plunging forward with all my body strained, prepared to risk firing one of the mines at my feet provided I made no noise.

Then, where the path met another, after two or three hundred yards, I stopped and waited, and everything was quiet.

A few minutes later my signaller came along the path, panting and exhausted with the heavy wireless-

PART THREE

set on his back. It was this that had made it impossible for him to run. But I found myself ruthless. He came up to me in the darkness and murmured, "I would never have thought it." He said he would never have thought me capable of running away like that. But I found myself ruthless and exultant. I was determined not to be taken prisoner, and I was only aware now of an extraordinary happiness, that I had not been captured. For a moment, while the three of us had stood on the gravel path waiting for the sentry to fire, the thought had occurred to me, "Shall I give myself up, and spend the rest of the War in a camp?" For a second or two I began to consider shouting back, "*Kannewell*!" Then the Italian had leapt away down into the woods. And now I wanted to drink something and swear and dance about, so happy was I. My signaller stood crestfallen and panting in front of me, and I wanted to make fun of him and mimic his pleading voice. I tried to find in myself hot shame, but I was without any pity for the signaller, and indeed I seemed to be without any afterthought, like one who had been granted a further reprieve. I told him that I could not have afforded to be captured with the maps, but I said it with a smile in the dark. I told him that all the English forward positions were marked on my map, then I led him to the edge of the path.

The two of us sat side by side in a barn close by and watched the field outside through the spaces between the logs. We decided to wait in case a German patrol should have been sent out to search for us. It was slightly less dark now, and between the winds the night was silent. It was a bad silence,

OF SINS AND WINTER

with things that ogled us from outside the barn in the dark and voices brought to us by the winds. We waited for nearly half an hour, then we began to fear that the English attack would begin in the next few minutes and that we would be caught between the two sides. So we decided to leave the talkative barn. We walked down the field and then along another path, listening all the time and stepping very quietly. Then we came to a back-yard of a farmhouse. We were just about to walk across when we saw a man before us. We slipped back quickly into the shadows, pressing ourselves against the wall. We remained absolutely still, watching him as he stood there, only a few feet from us, sharpening a knife. It was impossible to tell whether he was a soldier or not since he wore no hat and it was too dark to distinguish his clothes. He simply went on sharpening his knife, and now and then he looked up at the sky. He had a large round face which was white and flat in the darkness, and when he looked up it seemed to us that he smiled very slightly, knowing quite well what was going on. We stayed there for some minutes, then he turned quickly and went towards the door of the farmhouse. We crept carefully along, keeping to the shadows, looking back all the time, until we came to a wide road. I decided to walk along this road in the direction of the German lines again, feeling that English troops could not be far away.

When we had been walking a few minutes a machine-gun sounded out on our left, above us. I whispered to my signaller that I thought this was English, firing on a fixed tripod. It continued to fire burst after burst. Then the noise was taken up all

PART THREE

over the valley, there were rifle-shots and the sound of grenades. A number of muffled thuds came from the right, we started, throwing ourselves to the ground, and almost at once the mortar-bombs themselves fell, some on the road where we lay and some in the field to our right. We jumped up and ran towards the newly made craters in the field and got down into the deepest one of them as the bombardment continued. I was no longer conscious of a reprieve: I was only aware of having run away from a German sentry and of having failed to join my infantry company now that the attack had begun. Amid so much noise, and with lights coming from so many different quarters, it was now impossible to tell where the line of battle lay. I huddled with my signaller in the bottom of the crater, and we lit cigarettes under our blouses, shielding them with our hands when we took a puff.

When the bombardment died down we heard the sound of a track-vehicle not many yards away from us, beyond the field where we lay. I looked up and saw very dimly, in front of a farmhouse, what seemed to be a number of stationary vehicles, close together. I decided to risk whether these were German or English, and I told my signaller to get up. We walked towards the house, not troubling to skirt the field or crouch down, and as we drew nearer we saw that no sentry had been posted outside. I jumped across the path and bent down to look at one of the bonnets. They were English, and we ran laughing towards the farmhouse and pushed open the door.

After a few minutes we were provided with a guide to take us to the forward positions. He led us out into

OF SINS AND WINTER

the field again, then nearer and nearer the flesh of the battle, up hills, through woods, along gullies, as the rain began to teem down. And at last we came to the place of dying for that night, where there were white guiding tapes trampled underfoot, black mud, broken farmhouses, men standing silently in the doorways, each man holding his terror inside his head alone, the mortuary all about, the animals dead at their troughs, the smell coming with the wind, the quick shells jumping down from their ledges in the sky, the trees uprooted, flayed and black, the shouting men and sometimes weeping.

It seemed to me now that I would never become a scholar. I began to fear that I had not the strength and that at last, according to the dark justice of battle, the fatal splinter would seek me out.

And indeed, my lapse into the errors of the novice was even greater during the next operation.

It was all chaos under the sunlight, and the hill-side was marked and cut with trenches and men. From the black shell-holes smoke was drifting away, and the noise was deafening. I stood in the leaf-surrounded pathway like a prisoner, longing to run back. For into this metal clashing world I had to penetrate further.

Men were throwing hand-grenades over the crest. They would tear out the pin, run crouched to within a few yards of the crest, then throw. Sometimes a grenade would come from the other side and make a tiny explosion among the furrows, a muffled thud. All over the hill-side there were men, staring about

PART THREE

them apathetically amid the explosions and the sudden rifle-shots.

I had come forward in an armoured carrier. This I hated, because I feared that its loud grating tracks and whining engine would make us conspicuous, a landmark for Enemy shells, like a tank. With me were my driver and two signallers. I told them to go to the cover of a church nearby, then I climbed farther up the broken hill-side to the place where I saw a group of officers.

These officers had cheerful, begrimed faces. For they were so much in the company of death on this last golden autumnal day that they no longer cared. They chatted to each other among the bodies, and only for me, arriving suddenly from the rear, were these bodies not normal and accepted furniture. I ducked whenever a whisper came from the sky, but the others knew by now the language of this battle and stood about in their shirt-sleeves smoking, in a kind of cheerful lechery of death. I told them that I was looking for a certain infantry company.

"Where are they?" I asked, unable to keep my cheeks from trembling. One of them described to me the route I should take. I would have to be quick, for they were just going into the attack. Their task was to cross the river.

I was alone. My terror was for this reason the greater. I wished to prove that I was a sound scholar, and I was determined to get forward into the thick of the battle and to lay down most exciting concentrations of shells amid the Enemy positions; but at the same time I read my death in all the craters, the drifting clouds of smoke, and the stripped black

OF SINS AND WINTER

branches. Moreover, there was the terrible opportunity open to me of failing to find my company.

I turned away and ran down towards the path again. My face was screwed up against the sunlight, and also with anxiety, for the longer I was without my company the more anxious I became, fearing rebuke later on. Constantly my signaller had looked up from the wireless and said, "They want to know our position"; "They want to know how the battle is going"; "They want to know whether you wish to register any targets."

I turned the corner, round a hillock of burnt brown tufts of grass, and, bending my head forward to avoid the splinters, I almost toppled over a grinning boy who lay dead across the path, his arms outstretched and his eyes fixed on mine. I ran past him, my head turned away, past the German on an upturned cart with his head near the gravel path, to the shelter of the front porch of a broken church, without a blessing to give. Reprieve after reprieve—but how many could I survive? I panted, and smiled at my men. They were waiting for me under the porch, with the armoured carrier close by. They followed my calmness. This was the source of their tenacity, my calmness. I held their terror in check with my counterfeit exterior.

I told them that our company was about to cross the river, and that we had to join up with the main column. We got back into the carrier, crouching down behind the armoured sides, and we swung out from the gravel path of the church, skirting the staring boy. The carrier whined and grated, then began screaming fast along the path between the

PART THREE

trees, rising and falling like a speed-boat, hurting the knees and elbows as it swung and bounced and jerked towards the river.

At the top of the hill we suddenly saw before us, horribly naked and open to the sky, the long uncaptured valley and the great dried-up, pebbly river-bed. The first tanks were beginning to cross this river-bed, and it appeared that no shells were yet falling.

I knew that behind these tanks were the vehicles of our company, and I could see the infantrymen walking in two single files. They were walking on either side of the great tanks, which crawled very slowly, making a deep thunder in the distance. I turned to my driver, panic-stricken, and shouted to him to pull in at one of the farmhouses on the side of the road. It had occurred to me that the Enemy might at any moment begin shelling the river-bed, that they might bring out their bazookas and anti-tank weapons, and swarm down from the silent hills on the other side. I was certain that these hills were full of the Enemy.

"I want to do some observing from here," I said.

My driver nodded, joining gladly in the deception.

We left the carrier out of sight behind the farmhouse and I went through the empty ritual of bringing out my binoculars, my map-case and my compass. I wanted to delay things until I had lost the company again, but this desire was known to me only very vaguely. As for the Enemy positions which I was trying to observe: even if they had existed I could have seen nothing of them at this distance. The sun was beginning to grow misty, in a last, spent

OF SINS AND WINTER

autumnal fury, making everything glow, and the smell of death, going straight to the stomach, lay in the air of the valley. I could not imagine, as I calmly prevented my hands from trembling over the binoculars, how I would ever be able to cross this doomed yellow river-bed alive.

Soon all the tanks and vehicles had crossed to the other side, and the river-bed was once more deserted and silent. There had been no shells. I had lost my chance. The road on to which the tanks had disappeared could not be seen. There were too many trees and bushes, enchanted in the dying sun, for the roads to be seen. I focused and unfocused my binoculars on these motionless trees and bushes. Suddenly I jumped up and told my men to get back into the carrier. I simply pointed to the river-bed below as the driver started the engine and shouted, "Drive as fast as you can! Don't stop for a second!"

The driver was expert with the carrier and he flung it, bouncing and screaming, down the hill towards the pebbles, with the other signallers mute and watchful in the back, sitting amid the wireless equipment, slaves to my wayward oracle. The snout of the carrier plunged towards the pebbles from the steep bank and we began our journey across the river-bottom, with the stones flying away from the tracks underneath us and hitting against the undercarriage with sharp, dry cracks. Half-way across my fear eased suddenly, and I looked from one side to the other, down the most bountiful river between trees, with the water only in slight, still pools, and everything specially hallowed in the quiet close between these banks.

PART THREE

On the other side the bushes were torn away, and I did not know which of the track-marked paths to take. I shouted to my driver to go straight ahead. He put the carrier into low gear and accelerated hard to take the steep bank and hill beyond. At the top, when we had cleared the bank, all the silence and desertion of the leaf-muffled wood closed over us and we entered into its mystery, with the tracks quieter now that there was only soft earth, not pebbles, under them. I had not the faintest notion where to go. I could see no vehicles, no white guiding tape, no discarded equipment, and even the great wide tank-tracks in the soil of the path had died away. All my panic was renewed as I realised that we might be pushing forward into silent and waiting Enemy lines.

We came to a tall brown barn under trees, an island in the wood, where the earth was soft and very black, under piles of straw. Its sudden appearance was a shock, and the driver instantly put his foot down on the brake and switched the engine off. The vehicle rocked perilously forwards and back with the violence of his braking. We looked at the tall barn in silence, and no sound issued from within. I whispered to the others to cock their Tommy-guns, then, as I pulled open my revolver-holster, I told the driver to start his engine again and drive forward into the barn. Slowly we whined and trembled into the yellow, dying light of the silent barn, and no one was there. We put our guns away and climbed down, in happy reprieve.

"We'll try out the radio," I said, "and I'll pass down a map reference."

OF SINS AND WINTER

But nothing could be seen from this barn except trees, and it was impossible to do any map-reading. Nevertheless, I took out my compass and tried to discover by which paths we had come from the river, since my panic had been too great for me to notice. The dusk was growing. There was no longer any firing. The hour of dumb, stealthy patrols was about to begin.

The signaller had no sooner taken the hood off the wireless-set and fixed up the aerial than I turned round quickly and said, "Pack up. We're going." The men looked at me for a moment, but like slaves they always believed that I had made some important, if silent, discovery.

The noise of the carrier was even more shrill in the dead of the autumn evening, and we peered forward in the growing darkness, feeling forward slowly in the whining car. We were now hungry and tired, and our eyes were strained.

Three weeks before, every man had been told quietly that a hole was to be broken into the Enemy line, that it was to be a surprise attack, that an immense amount of armour would then be pushed through this hole, that the remaining Enemy forces in Italy would be surrounded, that the Alps would then be crossed and that those responsible for the surprise break-through would spend the rest of the War in peaceful occupation of Austria. Everything had gone forward very quietly and secretly, behind Tuscan hills, in orchards and vineyards, under camouflage nets. Staff officers had held whispered conferences in caravans. There were mock-concentrations on fronts to the west. Young officers walked

PART THREE

out of Headquarters with their eyes shining, and with a more important air.

The hole had been pushed deeper and more quickly than anyone had expected, with few casualties. After three weeks the objective had been reached. It was a line not far beyond the dried-up river-bed, along the crest close to where my armoured carrier was at this moment. Beyond the crest lay a great valley, and plains. Tomorrow, or at the latest the day after, a division of armour would be poured into this valley, and the campaign in Italy would be over.

The hole in the Enemy's line was long and narrow, and a battalion was strong enough to hold the forward tip of this hole. It was thus possible for me to fear that by my absence from my company I could render fruitless a three-weeks campaign, and perhaps protract the fighting in Italy for another year. I did not believe in this possibility, but I accused myself of it. As a dependable scholar, I should be in at the kill. Staring before me in the growing darkness, I sweated with my panic, seeing myself as the criminal of this campaign.

At last we came to a dark, stone house where there were lights. Here we saw English troops. In the yard there were long, heavy belts of German ammunition, and Schmeizers in perfect condition, immense binoculars, discarded wireless-sets and tripods for machine-guns. I stood turning over these strange articles, aware that I had missed the battle. There were no signs of fighting. The walls were not crumbled, the fields were flat and green, the trees were intact, with gold and reddening leaves, the sky

OF SINS AND WINTER

was entirely quiet. In an hour the last remaining Enemy must have fled and lodged themselves on the other side of the valley beyond.

When at last I walked into the long room where my company was, the commander simply looked up at me for a moment, drowsily, and smiled. It was a smile full of uneasiness. It said, "For God's sake do not judge me." I was astonished.

"I've been looking for you everywhere," I said, standing over him in the growing darkness.

He made his excuse in a tired, anxious, tender way: "We were dog-tired, so I decided to kip down here. But it's all clear farther up. And I shall be sending out a patrol."

The other men in the room seemed to be nodding, watching me, as if to say, "Excuse our commander. He was once brave. We adore him."

"Did you need me?" I asked. He shook his head. There had been no battle. They had simply crossed the river behind the tanks, and the Enemy had fled.

I think I ceased to look pugnacious now that criminality had slipped from my shoulders. I smiled, with my hands in my pockets. "You look as though you need a long sleep." I added professionally, with a calmness which he may have envied: "I've only one thing to worry you with—the SOS targets. What do you suggest?"

The commander did not understand. He shook his head, blinking up at me. He looked pale, frozen, but above all suspicious, as if nothing could any more be trusted in this metal clashing world: *anything* might carry in it the deadly sting. He was a handsome, robust man in his middle age, and his hair was

PART THREE

greying at the sides. He had been awarded honours for heroism three times. He was a legend: if he took a company forward it was always sure to reach the objective; he never withdrew. But his past grey battles had mounted up, he had been granted too many reprieves, and now he went into battle glancing about him secretly, trembling, his face white and marked, his shoulders bent forward ready to suffer the last bombardment of all, wrapped in the silence of his island of grief. He rarely issued an order now. His men moved with him by instinct, like adoring animals.

I bent down and laid my map on his knees, then shone my torch, prolonging the pain of this older man. He stared at the map, but emptily. I pointed out to him several places near the house which would serve as SOS targets for the night, and he nodded each time I spoke, though he understood nothing. His relief was extraordinary when I rose and left the room.

I stood at the door looking out at the cobbled yard and the trees beyond, aware of my counterfeit victory.

My driver and signallers had found a small hollow in the outside wall, probably an oven for bread-making, and here they were making dinner over a spirit-fire. I sat down with them, quite happy and unafraid, for the crest had been achieved, the armour would tomorrow pass over the hills, and my worth as a scholar had been questioned by no one. I sat inside the oven, curling myself up, and ate ravenously.

When I had entered the dark room I had seen the commander's pleading eyes, and had instantly felt too young. They were eyes wiser by a thousand

OF SINS AND WINTER

deaths. Having seen too much, they were broken from within. All day this man walked in utter silence, and at night, when the battle was over, he sat alone, disbelieving his survival.

Once he had entered the competition for gallantry and always won it, he had been wild and alert, but now it no longer interested him, he was stiff and old, believing in nothing. His eyes seemed to tell me: Oh, yes, you are one of the others, the unbroken ones for whom it is a game.

The next day it was cold and sunny, with a long white frost spread over the hills to the south. Soon after dawn I crawled out of the oven and looked at the road leading to the valley behind me, at the hundreds upon hundreds of tanks and vehicles, nose to tail. I watched them for a long time, then sat with my men and ate breakfast. For the next three hours these tanks and vehicles hardly moved. Behind me, across the echoing valley, there was incessant firing. I was light, healthy, yearning to move about, to leave this house.

I suddenly realised that I was free to go. I wanted to see the battle of the tanks. My heroism welled up, after a day becalmed. I shouted to my driver. Then I asked the commander, standing at his side in the doorway, whether he also would like to come. It would mean going to one of the forward posts. He gave me a quick, unwilling, dark look, and shook his head.

But when, later on, I asked for a lighter car to replace my own noisy, unwieldy carrier, he said he would be coming after all. He walked swiftly back into the long room and fetched his cap, then went

PART THREE

with me to the car under trees nearby. He wore heavy fur gloves, and constantly made a hissing noise through his teeth, as if he were frozen.

He sat in utter silence at my side as I drove between the trees. The ruts in the path were frozen hard, and in a day it had become winter. I was always about to turn my head and say something to him, but his silence was so terrible, he was so wise and alone in his jolting seat, that I did not dare.

I drove swiftly uphill through the woods, then we came out into the open, where a great doomed silence and stillness began to fall over us, denoting, with no signs that could be seen or touched, the presence of battle. The car slowed down and now above its slight throbbing we heard the cannon shells fly across the valley with a quick, awful whirring, then the satisfying thud of something finding its home.

At the top of the hill, on the edge of a maize-field, lay a cottage, and I drove towards this. On either side of us were rising fields, their furrows dry and cracked, already harvested. Over them all lay this silent desolation. The chill morning sunlight made no difference. But I was hilarious. I was hitting the steering wheel with the palms of my gloved hands as I drove, and humming. I was muffled up to my chin, and I felt an immeasurable prowess, in which I could achieve anything.

We arrived at the back-entrance of the cottage and jumped down quickly, out of sight to the Enemy in the valley beyond. We went into the dark rooms, and at every window there was a cluster of infantrymen watching the battle of the tanks.

This valley was huge and pale green. It spread out

OF SINS AND WINTER

long and flat before the windows, and from its centre I saw black smoke gushing up, then, on the flat of the frosty lawn, several English tanks, one of them quite black and gutted, the others broken and awry. Near them was a German tank, still punching them to death, like a great proud staring beetle shooting its random stings.

I did not understand what I saw. In battle everybody plunged about blindly, and only in the quiet, moaning aftermath did they begin to know the meaning.

I talked a great deal at the window, stamping my feet with the cold, and once or twice the commander glanced up at me as if he thought I was mad. I wanted to risk everything. I wanted to make this house part of the battle. I saw the padre near me, a small, fat-cheeked man with an utterly idiotic look of *bonhomie* in his eyes, and I began talking to him in a false, rather mocking way. I began to impress everybody as a reckless young buck. It was the first time I had openly played this role in battle.

A few hours later my warmth died. Only the commander, alone on his terrible island, knew the truth from the beginning. The valley had the look of an aftermath. No further tanks came out into this valley from the English lines. When the darkness grew like a whisper under the huge red clamouring sky, stretching out and out from the low hills, only these burning tanks remained, glowing quietly on the darkened lawns.

To the south clouds gathered, threatening the first of the long winter-rains. The tanks and vehicles which I had seen at dawn still lay choking the roads,

PART THREE

motionless and nose to tail. The peaceful occupation of Austria became something to smile at, before one spat. The rain came, and the tanks slipped and roared in the mud on their way back from the forward lines.

When the news had slowly taken hold, that the Enemy line was intact, everyone fell into a kind of tired, sneering misery. When, a few weeks later amid rain, we fended off one German counter-attack after another, we did so with a bitter spite, casually and slothfully.

It was during these counter-attacks north of Rimini that I decided to attempt the role of a hero. They lasted two or three weeks, and it was our last task in Italy to repulse them. We were successful. My will to withstand the ravages of terror almost broke down; then, at the eleventh hour, not many days before we were withdrawn from the line, it revived in a kind of sudden miraculous abandon.

I remember sitting by the top window of a house listening to the shouts in the darkness outside. The cries broke through the silence. There was no firing.

"Come out, you bastards!"

An English platoon lay under the window, among the furrows, waiting behind their rifles, and on the other side of the field sat the Germans, in another house, behind machine-guns, also waiting. The night was cold and very dark. The shouting of the Englishmen was drawn out long in the silence, high-pitched, wild, a weird cry for warm blood. "Come out! Come out!"

It was a terrible, half-dejected shriek, and the

OF SINS AND WINTER

silence followed it, with nothing stirring from the Enemy house.

Now there was a quicker shriek, a hoarse rush of words, less heavy and sad with desire than the other cries. I think it was something like this: "Let's have you, Jerry, I want a knife in you tonight!"

The man who shouted this was small, thin and a little bent; he had a sharp nose and quick, restless eyes behind spectacles, and a flushed face. He was a Londoner, from the prison of streets. Not long before this he had taken six prisoners single-handed. It was said that he had lined them up against the wall and told them to lay out their watches, bank-notes and fountain-pens on the floor. And when they had finished he fixed his Tommy-gun in his arm and shot them all dead, in a single burst. For five days blood was in his nostrils. The others said he was now a rich man, he had taken so much money and merchandise from those he captured. There were many legends about him.

Suddenly he jumped up, daring the Enemy to fire at him as he stood in the darkness among the furrows. At last there was a sharp, clattering burst of fire from the Enemy house, and a scuffle, and a groan. The platoon began running towards the Enemy, but the machine-gun bided its time again. It waited, then once more the great metal clatter sounded out across the night, long and continuous, only pausing briefly, a metal monster pausing to swallow.

Their blood-mad evening ended an hour later. The Londoner led them back, with a red bullet-wound in the calf of his right leg. He was excited and resentful, with bright eyes. It was as if the other

PART THREE

soldiers in the hot room were also the Enemy, whose blood he needed, for they were human, soft and killable. He at first refused to have his leg dressed. He kept saying, "No, f—— the dressing."

The Major and I arranged another attack for early the next morning, to smother the machine-gun. I would lay down a small concentration, and then a tank would be sent forward. The Londoner was ashamed of this. He was ashamed to invoke the abstract laws: to call up a tank by radio, to rely on distant guns. He shook his head and swore that he would go out again that night. It could all be done with a knife, quietly. He could do it in slippers, stealing up behind the house, his face blackened. He spent all night moaning in his sleep, robbed of his blood.

The weird noises of the attack, then this thirsty moaning at night when everything was still again, entered my delirium of fatigue, filling it like the voices of a nightmare. We were at the very end of an operation, and the next house, which we would certainly take at dawn the next day, was our last objective.

During the night I laid down bombardment, after bombardment to keep off Enemy patrols. I could hardly keep my eyes open after so long without rest, and my head nodded forward again and again as I sat by the window. I remember these events as a sickening delirium, confused with the spilling of warm blood.

At dawn a tank came up, and two cannon shells were fired into the Enemy house. One of our platoons occupied it almost at once, and our wounded

OF SINS AND WINTER

were brought in. We knew that we were now free. The Enemy bombardments began and continued close around the house for three hours. An officer was killed. He was brought into one of the rooms of the house, a blanket was pulled over his frightened, pleading eyes, then silence fell. I had seen him talking with a friend outside, his hands in his pockets, hardly a minute before. This friend came into the room with the stretcher, and for an hour he paced about, his head bowed, occasionally glancing at the body, astonished by the fragility of men, who can be taken in a second. I often saw friends stay together like this, one of them dead. I remember the young Guardsman at Cerasola, with a dreadful wound between his legs, and his friend, plump and short, who sat at his feet all day, freezing, staring at the white side of the mountain, sneering at the men who passed him, moaning and cursing to himself.

There were no more shells. By the middle of the afternoon we were almost a mile from the forward line, and of no further interest to Enemy guns.

I rested in this quiet farmhouse, feeling a blessed relief to know that I was alive. It was that feeling of paradise which so often came after a stiff operation. The battle had stalked on, leaving charred fields, broken fences and the smell of newly exploded shells.

I was sure that my regiment could not ask me to do more now: I was sure they would allow me to remain here, in the dark farm-room where twigs were burning in the hearth, behind the lines. There could be no doubt of that.

I sat by the table and smoked, and occasionally I

PART THREE

ordered up a glass of Marsala from the cellar, where the family still kept themselves, sceptical of the silence. The order had been given that "B" company would pass through us here: "B" company was fresh and would occupy positions well forward, in the very thick of the fighting, to hold the line against counter-attack.

I was cheerful at the prospect of another company passing through. I would continue to rest here, I would read, I would sleep a great deal in a kind of cot upstairs, and after two days I would be recalled to my own lines.

Yet a doubt did begin in me. I could not quiet it. The fields were in silence. The Londoner who had cried out for blood in the night had been taken to the First Aid Post. The Enemy were using their shells for more important targets, in the next valley, where people said everything was grey and still, bristling with Enemy, who were waiting behind machine-guns, bazookas and Schmeizers, waiting in camouflaged tanks and lying low in the houses. The Major told me that he did not envy "B" company.

We talked together until our lunch came in mess-tins. "B" company would pass through our lines in an hour's time, and I gradually became stiffer in my chair, more and more doubtful as the minutes went by, dreading each movement my wireless signaller made, lest he should be about to deliver the fatal news. Nothing occurred for fifty minutes. There was not a sound from outside, and even the infantry headquarters did not call the Major by telephone.

Outside, all the trees were charred and broken. The breeze stirred nothing, and the sky was dismal,

OF SINS AND WINTER

heavy and low. The fences were all crushed down, and the hill rose to a long bleak crest. Everywhere there was black mud, and the two farmhouses nearby were in ruins, smoking.

A voice spoke in the earphones, and my signaller started. He answered the call and turned his eyes towards me, knowing what this must be: "Officer to speak."

I went shaking to the mouthpiece and spoke, looking calm and ready. The officer at headquarters told me to join "B" company when they passed through our lines, and to learn all tactical information from the commander. I must prepare to move now.

"Any questions?"

"No questions."

I would die. I must die. I moved away from the wireless, throwing the mouthpiece down into the signaller's lap. The hidden oracle could not possibly last another hour. It had been awake too long. The surrender would have to come soon. I was not more than human. I could not depend on this divine help for much longer. I was tired and numb, I was no use for battle, and I knew now that I must die. I had played away all my chances. I had got away with a reprieve, against heavily loaded dice, too many times. As I threw the mouthpiece into the signaller's lap I told him calmly, rather ironically, as if this was a joke we had once shared: "Close the wireless down. We are moving up with 'B' company. Tell the others. Prepare to move now."

I went to the door of the kitchen, my eyes blind with the certainty that now I must die. The future

PART THREE

had suddenly ended. While I had been sitting at the table an hour before, smoking and drinking wine, I had dreamed the future, the future had been feeding my flesh. But now the dark curtain fell, cutting the future off. I was stifled. I could not get forward. There was no movement into the open. I must run somewhere. I must get out of it. I could not go to my death so helplessly. I should get back on the wireless to infantry headquarters, and I should explain to my senior officer that the hidden oracle was failing me, that my divine powers were for the moment at an end, that I must, but must, must, be excused this once, just for two or three days, until I had rested and collected myself and my hidden oracle was at work again and I could see things clearly again and get myself into trim for another battle. But I moved towards the door, blind and hot, and I heard the Major call out behind me: "Christ, are you off again?"

There was a horrible, rolling sickness in my stomach. I could already feel my body as a corpse. I could already feel it lying in the open, and gradually people deserting it, and night falling. I would give anything for warmth, between myself and another human beast, a touch, a glance; it need only be a momentary thing. But I yearned for this simple touch before I must die.

I closed the door and then saw the woman standing before me.

It was a small corridor full of rubble, and behind her were the stairs and the great hole in the wall which had been torn by an Enemy tank.

She was standing still, as if she had been waiting

OF SINS AND WINTER

for me. The ruined corridor was empty save for her. She stood with her strong denied body in the corner, facing me. She was pale, with having been too long in the cellar. We stared at each other. Our eyes went deep into each other, losing themselves. I swayed, my legs were weak under me. I walked slowly towards the steps, and she drew against the wall. Perhaps she saw a death-look in my eyes, wanted to pull me back. I came level with her, and she stood flat against the wall, open to me, her eyes still lost in mine. I almost clasped her. I almost fell towards her. She seemed to utter a gasp. The ruined corridor was vague, it seemed to move—the rubble under our feet and the chipped wall. Her mouth was open. We were helpless, reeling in the corridor. It must be, before I died. It must be, behind the stairs, at the entrance to the cellar, dark and hidden. It would be so quick and full as to be one beast.

A voice shouted down to me from upstairs.

I turned violently, slipped in the dust and looked up to the top of the ruined stairs. There I saw the man whom I had once betrayed so gladly along the path marked *M I N L N*. The woman was now behind me, watching me from behind. I stared up at the signaller, panting and hollow. I went up to the sixth or seventh step.

He asked me whether I wanted my bed put down upstairs or in the kitchen, where I had stayed the previous night.

"We are moving. Prepare to move. Prepare to move now. Tell the others. Go back and prepare to move."

I went to the top of the stairs, to hear the moans

PART THREE

and growls of the signallers, then rushed back towards the great hole in the wall, helpless and slipping. I must, I must, before I died. I pulled myself round the corner and looked, hoping and hoping, praying in a single second of time that it would be so, but nothing was there now save the rubble and the chipped wall. I ran towards the cellar door and pushed it open, but here also there was nothing in the deep well of shadows. I could hear only the sound of whispering voices far below.

I went from corner to corner searching, almost calling out. But everything was as before. For the last time I slipped down the loose rubble and pushed open the cellar door, but now I knew, more fatally, that it was at an end. There was the sound of hushed voices from the room where the Major sat.

I went out to meet the commander of "B" company, shattered and frail. There was now only a sharp, gripping pain at the base of my stomach. My sex had died, in a ghastly, dumb surrender. I stood watching the new company come in single file through the gate of the field towards the house. I stood with my shoulders bowed, not troubling to conceal my pain. The sky was full of low, grey clouds, and there was no avenue of escape for me. So I became calmer, a helpless prisoner walking to his sentence. If only I could have been granted that moment of blood. So many touches had been denied me all these months.

It did not matter which beast gave me warmth. Any beast in all the world. Such refinements belong to those who have a future, living in cities. But to one who belonged to the earth, who might soon

OF SINS AND WINTER

be claimed by the desiring earth, this beast with the pale face and the open mouth, and her body in supplication, was any and all beasts, the last in all the world, my maker and receiver.

I went to the head of "B" company, nodded to the commander, then began walking at his side. We hardly spoke on our slow way to the assembly point. There was little noise now of firing from the forward positions, and we walked in a long silent file, our heads bowed, past a charred wood and, here and there, a dumb, untenanted farmhouse.

We stayed the night at the assembly point, in a small mansion every room of which was crowded. There were groups of men from different Companies talking together and playing cards, and in the corridors wireless-sets were being tried out. It seemed a very friendly, safe and warm place. I recognised old faces. Companies were constantly arriving from the rear, and others setting out for the forward posts.

At dawn the following day we moved again, leaving the sound of voices in the mansion behind us. We went among shrubs and young trees, towards the fields where everything was particularly still, with that fatal immobility of the battlefield. We walked along a deep ditch, crouched down, and made for a house at the foot of the hill. This house, like another to its left which was almost identical, overlooked numberless wide, flat fields. These fields were in Enemy hands.

The house was open to the Enemy on three sides; moreover, since it stood on a hillock, it could easily

PART THREE

be cut off from the rear and surrounded. One by one we jumped from the ditch up to the back-entrance. It meant running for a yard or so across open ground, so we jumped at intervals, as the commander let us go. Then we walked through a barn where there were two Germans lying dead, their arms held stiffly up, to a great kitchen where we put down our packs and lit cigarettes. It was a sunny morning. We did not know whether the Enemy had observed us coming in.

I set up my wireless by one of the flank windows, but if I wished to observe the Enemy I had to go beyond the kitchen to a cattle-shed with long barred windows. This looked directly across the Enemy line of advance. My task would be to bring down fire on that field if it were necessary.

I lost no time. Once my signaller had exchanged signals with the rear, I went into the barn and, after looking briefly at my map, began calling out orders to him. A few minutes passed, then the first shell came over. I corrected it, ordered several more, and at last registered the target in the very middle of the field before me. I did the same with the fields to the flank. Thus, after less than an hour, I had all the Enemy's lines of approach covered by our guns. I think I was in a quick, rather matter-of-fact mood at this time. I no longer thought about death.

We had a day of sporadic bombardment. When dusk came double sentries were posted at all the windows and at the great open doors of the barn. No movement could be seen in the dark fields outside, but suddenly there was an explosion, one of the men in the cattle-shed screamed out, and part of the

OF SINS AND WINTER

shed-wall collapsed. Brick-dust came drifting through into the kitchen. A large hole had been blown in the wall, either by a tank or a bazooka. Our sentries did not reply with Bren-gun fire. They wanted to give the impression that our house was unoccupied. The wounded man was carried back to the barn, where he was put down near the two dead Germans, then left alone, moaning, with little hope of life. I began to hate the commander—a man I had never before seen—for not nursing his own wounded or sending them back to one of the aid-posts, and for not sending out patrols. But he did not know what he was doing. No one obeyed his orders. He was replacing the grey-haired commander whose nerve had given way, and this was his baptism.

The German patrol did not come again. But all through the night we heard the jarring scream of their armoured vehicles very close by. We felt alone and exposed on our hillock. No tank could possibly come to defend us. But Enemy tanks could come safely to the very windows of the cattle-shed and blow down our walls. We had nowhere to run, no trenches (unless we tried to dig down into the hard ground of the barn) and no anti-tank weapons. The men knew soon enough that this was a most untactical position, without looking out of the windows. A house felt safe, instantly, or it did not.

After a day they were all lying about the floor, with ~~many~~ condemned faces. A bombardment had brought half the roof down, and no one expected the walls to last much longer. There were forty or more men in one room, lying on their backs and huddled together in the silence, waiting for the second fatal

PART THREE

dusk to fall. It was doubtful whether the sentries at the window would defend the house if it were attacked. The spirit had gone out of them, and they were lying under the windows smoking cynically.

During the afternoon there was a sudden shout from the cattle-shed, and someone called me. I ran to the machine-gunner's side and looked out of the barred window. At the edge of the field before us I saw a terrifying spectacle.

It was exactly what we had feared most. The other men were looking at me helplessly, as if only I would know how to rescue them. For at the edge of the ploughed field there was a German tank, not more than a hundred yards away, and slowly its gun-turret was turning, in the direction of our house. It was too late for me to order gun-fire. My shells were in any case rather ineffectual against tanks, and there would certainly be no time to order a bombardment by heavy guns. We were without trenches. If we ran out of the house we would be machine-gunned. The cannon-shells of this tank could pierce two thick walls. The slow turning of the gun-turret was our sentence of death, and we all watched it in breathless silence, wide-eyed like children.

The farmhouse to our left, only a few yards from us, was now occupied by another company. Only a small valley of bushes separated us.

The tank was now quite still. Just to the right of it, at the end of the field among the furrows, I could now see a section of German infantry. I saw them throw themselves down. One of them was carrying a bazooka.

The gun-turret continued to turn slowly, then

OF SINS AND WINTER

stopped. We were astonished. It was another reprieve. The muzzle of the tank-gun was trained on to the other farmhouse. We waited, to make sure. It did not move. It remained fixed on the house to our left, undergoing final adjustments for range.

I asked quietly, "Can you see Jerry?" and the machine-gunner nodded. We agreed not to fire unless the Enemy made a direct attack on us. The Germans were lying in the furrows quite conspicuously, making signs to each other, waiting for the tank to send out its first deadly sting.

It fired once, then paused. It sent forth a great puff of white smoke, while the long barrel recoiled. Then it fired again. This shell hit the farmhouse to our left, square on the front wall. A yellow shower of rubble went up, and the Germans in the field ran forward, leaping over the furrows. The tank fired again, and this time blew most of the wall down. Then we saw the back-door of this farmhouse burst open and the Englishmen there come running out, towards the cover of the trees and bushes farther up-hill. Some of them were hatless, and covered with yellow dust. They left everything behind them—their armoured carrier in the back-yard, their maps, and their wireless equipment. All this we could see clearly from the cattle-shed.

The Germans ran to within a few yards of the house. Gradually, man by man, the one giving covering fire to the other, they surrounded it and found it empty. The attack was swift and expert. One or two of them began examining the armoured carrier in the back-yard, turning over all its equipment with rapt curiosity. They seemed to have forgotten our farm-

PART THREE

house. We were quite sure now that they thought it unoccupied.

The tank's gun-turret began to move slowly away from us again. Then its great motor started up and it moved along the path, away from the field, and finally out of sight.

Nevertheless, everyone began to feel that the Germans would come again at dusk, that they were only biding their time because they were not quite sure of our strength. So, as the dusk grew, every man was cowed down for the final blow. There was no worse monster to the infantryman than the Enemy tank, with its huge grinding wheels and relentless gun. It could not be resisted.

Everyone spoke in a low voice now, lest the Germans in the other house should hear them. When the farmer went out to draw water a machine-gun instantly spoke from this house, and he lost some flesh off a finger. Then blue tracer bullets came spraying all over the side wall, shattering our windows. It now seemed quite certain that they would come after dusk. Again the silence fell.

The commander had now capitulated entirely to his terror. Strangely, this gave me heart. His orders were absurd, and he delivered them in a trembling voice which hid nothing from the others. He sat with a swollen, wan face under the chimney, his eyes moving about, while the sergeant-major, hitherto legendary for his courage, lay straight out under the stairs, everything in him sunk down to a doomed torpor. I stepped over his body and said something to him, but he hardly opened his eyes to reply. I remember feeling a quick flame of anger go through me, but I

OF SINS AND WINTER

stopped myself making a scene: I wished to bide my time.

As the dusk grew the sound of tanks, grinding and whining, came weirdly from the German lines, so loud and ominous. A machine-gunner was crouching down underneath the window, alone with his fear, while the muzzle of his gun pointed uselessly to the sky. In the barn the wounded man lay grieving, and people tried to quiet his persistent moans, lest the Enemy should hear. Men sat with their heads bowed, or lay on the stone floor, or watched with quiet, unimpassioned curiosity the face of their commander in the hour of his capitulation. They watched the haunted shifting of his eyes as they might watch an experiment, with their sympathy disengaged, and their hatred also.

In this room heroism had become an eccentricity.

My cue was given to me quite unexpectedly. It came from one of my own men, whom I expected to be influenced by my counterfeit calmness, as in other battles. My terror rarely, if ever, showed in my face, my movements or my tone of voice. But this signaller had been sleepless too long. All afternoon he had been nursing his fear. He came murmuring to me in the dusk, trying to hide his voice from the others. It was as if he were deliberately co-operating with my wish. I was sitting on a black sofa next to the wireless-set, waiting to speak to my headquarters, and he knelt down at my side, gripping my leg. He was trying to hold back his tears, and I heard him say, "Please let me go back. It's no use. I can't go on."

He said this in quite a matter-of-fact way, as if he were asking me to be sensible. At first I did not

PART THREE

understand, because it happened so suddenly. I kept asking, "What? What?" Then I saw how he was kneeling, half-cringing at the edge of the sofa, speaking with his head bowed, as the tanks grated and whined outside and the wounded man cried out in the barn. The infantrymen in the room were all aware of what was going on. They were waiting for my verdict, to discover how far it was permissible for a man here to capitulate to his terror. I saw my opportunity. I spoke to my signaller loudly, no longer caring for the cautious silence everyone was preserving.

My feelings were quite cold, but I answered him in the manner of one who feels an unbearable contempt, a hot disgust.

I shouted, "Look at you grovelling and snivelling on the floor! You're just a worm. Do you dare to talk to me in that condition? You're disgusting to me. I don't want you near me. You're not human any more, you're something low. . . ." I do not know that these were my precise words, but they are near to what I said. I think I spoke in a terrible castigating tone, like a punishing father, I shouted into the silence of the room, with all the other capitulators listening, and feeling the sting of my rebuke on themselves.

As I turned back to the wireless' my other men took the signaller by the shoulders and drew him away, whispering to him. For now everybody knew that capitulation was not permissible. My last words to the man were: "Come back to me when you're human."

The recovery was quick. This was the first stage of my success. When it was almost dark he returned

OF SINS AND WINTER

to my side and said in a very clear voice, "I'm sorry, sir. I'm all right now." I looked up at him grudgingly, and quite deliberately gave him a kind of fierce, patriarchal look. Then I replied, my effect gained: "Very well. You may go back to your post."

I gave orders down the wireless for all guns to stand ready. The guns of the entire sector were put at my disposal, and I asked that heavy guns should also be called on to my target, as many as possible. I prepared everything just before dusk fell. I had my plan ready.

I jumped up and began walking among the infantrymen. I felt a sudden triumphant abandon. I began pointing at them and ridiculing them, laughing at the way they were all lying down. I mimicked their terrified faces. I made little prancing steps across the room between their bodies. I did a mock trembling. Some of them turned away because I made them feel ashamed. In their own eyes they had ceased to be men.

I then addressed them, shouting at the top of my voice. I told them I could save them if they wanted me to. I told them I could do this by bringing down bombardments so near our house that our own lives would be in danger from them. Many of the shells would hit the house. Some of us might be killed. I therefore required their permission. It was our only chance. "Would they risk it? There was no other means of survival. They had to put themselves in my hands. If they did that, if they were prepared to leave everything to me, I would save them, I would get most of them out of here alive."

PART THREE

"You're good men," I told them, "you are worth saving, so for God's sake don't give up yet."

I threw out my voice like an actor, speaking with a kind of fierce rhetoric. My body was tensed, as if I were about to spring forward. I walked among them and even chucked one of them under the chin. They were suddenly children before me, and men of forty looked back to me like embarrassed sons. I was utterly taken back at the thought of my power over them. I stirred them to go back to their posts at the window and to fight again. I had acted my speech and my antics with no effort whatsoever.

It came as something quite natural, and I moved swiftly and easily, as if I were predestined to do so, into this new mood of leadership. I think I had spoken to men like this before, but never with this absolutely sure calm. My calm was not at this moment counterfeit. I felt free, and therefore fluent. I was free because I knew at last that I, and no commanders, no headquarters behind us, controlled this battle, and that perhaps on this battle depended the fate of our sector.

I had heard of a gunner who had brought down shells on himself to save a position; that act was spoken of as gallantry. And I was doing nothing less, *I, I*. I could have wept with gratitude, that this spirit should so suddenly have entered me.

They agreed to be bombarded. I had given them the chance to make a free heroic decision, and in doing so I renewed their characters for them. As for my plan, I would have followed my plan in any case.

But I did not believe in our success. Perhaps, at this time, I was the only man in the room who did

OF SINS AND WINTER

not. I was sure that the bazookas would blow holes in the walls, that the Germans outside, lying among the furrows, would brave my shells and throw grenades in at the windows and surround the house and take us prisoner or shoot us in the dark. I became nervous as the night fell and the silence outside in the ploughed field pointed forward to the attack. But I knew at least that the men at the windows would now fight.

I gave my orders quickly over the wireless, and the voice in the earphones asked me whether I would take responsibility for such a close target. I said, "Yes, I will take responsibility for the closeness of this target," announcing it not only to the rubber mouthpiece of the radio but to the infantrymen in the room, as they elected themselves heroes in the dusky silence. There would be hundreds upon hundreds of shells falling, and I hoped that they would catch the Enemy in the furrows. I waited for the guns of the Division to report *Ready*, then I gave the order, *Fire*; it was almost nightfall.

The men stood about in the dark room, and the sentries at the windows waited. They listened for the shells as they might for the steps of a saviour, with both awe and complacency. They passed the word to each other, speaking in low voices, *The shells are coming over now*.

There was a first whisper, then another whisper, a light singing in the sky, and suddenly the first shell dived down and crashed close to the house. The second came, then they began to fly over in choirs, the noise immense now, the house shaking, the men all shouting at each other, and thick pungent shell-

PART THREE

smoke drifting through the windows and the open barn-door. The sentries were lying low to avoid the splinters which came whirring in.

A shell exploded near the mouth of the barn, then another inside the door, and the wounded man lying out there with the dead Germans for company cried out again and again to be taken farther into the house, but it was not the time for wounded men, it was not their time of blessing. There was so much noise and so much moving about that his was only the faintest of cries, buried in thunder.

I was sitting on the black sofa, crouched down so that I would have as much protection as possible from the window behind me. The shells hit the walls, but being light did not break them down. The dust and shell-smoke was making everybody cough, and there was the sound of rubble falling down from the walls outside and the slated roof.

A machine-gunner at one of the windows suddenly shouted, "They're outside!"

I heard another man shout, "Fire, you silly bastard!"

At once the machine-guns sounded out, filling the room with a deafening metal clatter as they sprayed the black field from side to side. In answer to them, only a second or two later, came a long jet of blue tracer bullets from the Enemy house, lighting up the room.

Someone called out to me, and I jumped up, feeling my way across the floor.

"Who wants me?" I shouted.

A man caught hold of me in the darkness and told me that a German had just looked in at the window,

OF SINS AND WINTER

had stared right down the muzzle of his gun. He thought he could make out at least a section of German infantry close to the house. He had seen nothing after he had opened fire. It was possible that they were scouting forward while the main Enemy body stayed behind in the flat of the field. It was among these other men, lying in the furrows, that I hoped my shells were falling.

The shell-fire was beginning to abate. The moment I realised this I rushed back to my wireless, pushing over the men who stood in my way, and felt for the black sofa, then snatched the mouthpiece of the radio away from the signaller and shouted into it: "*Repeat. Repeat.*"

The machine-gun paused, there was almost silence for a space, then gradually the sky began to fill again with the whirring of handfuls of shells, and again the explosions echoed across the field. One, two, three fell together, then a pause, then a rain of dozens upon dozens. Splinters were hitting the ceiling and dropping to the stone floor, as the machine-guns began to fight out another long clattering battle.

At last, during one of the pauses, we heard the muffled cry from the field outside, quite close to the window: "*Kamerad! Kamerad!*"

A sentry called out, "They've got their hands up!"

Somebody else shouted back, "Keep them covered. Make them stay there," as I took up the mouthpiece of the radio again. With a feeling of most blessed ease I spoke to the artillery lines: "Stop firing. Stop. Gun-fire successful."

When the field was silent again, the last spasmodic shells finished, one of the English sentries

PART THREE

called to the men outside: "Commen zee here!" Eight Germans rose out of the furrows, probably the first section of a company which had retired, and walked round the house to the door of the barn. They came into the room in single file, still murmuring, "*Kamerad, Kamerad*," while the wounded man in the barn seemed to weep now rather than moan, in an aftermath of the deepest, most horrible misery.

Part 4

My own aftermath, both ecstatic and painful, took place in Greece, where we were sent during the spring of 1945. It was an idyll after the storm, but mixed with it there was a kind of evening anguish. The child was now altogether gone.

I established my headquarters in Ligourion, and my task was to administer an area of two hundred and fifty square miles between Nea Epidaurus, a fishing village on the Saronic Gulf, and the city of Nauplion. I took two rooms at the very top of the village, under a hill covered with boulders and stones, and sometimes I would walk out on to my wooden balcony at night and peer into the shadows, startled by rifle-shots. These would be soldiers from the national guard shooting at nothing, their faces grim behind the boulders.

I chose an old man with rags on his back for an interpreter. This old man stayed with me always, pushed little boys out of the way when I walked down the village street, secured for me the best wine out of the houses, and exaggerated my powers to his Greek friends and enemies. I remember how one morning when the sun was high he leaned over a balcony with me and spoke quietly. He told me that he wanted me to see his daughter, who was eleven years old and very sick.

When I met her she was lying on a couch in the

OF SINS AND WINTER

corner of his hut. She had very black eyes, I remember. She smiled at me as I bent down to take her hand, and her smile was so open and astonishing, but something I had never seen before, that I stepped back for a moment, feeling my murders heavy upon me.

The hut was on the edge of a solemn cypress wood, where the wind listened and was kind. It stood at the beginning of a path which led up to a museum and the amphitheatre of Epidaurus, where the priests of Aesculapius had worked their cures.

I took her by car to Nauplion, together with her mother. I had been told the name of her sickness several times, but I spoke no Greek and the old man did not know the English word for it. The hospital was white and oblong behind trees, clean and hushed. I walked with her into the receptionist's office, then to the doctor's consulting room. The old man's wife nodded and smiled at everyone. She was a thin, pale woman, and she nervously rubbed her hands together, as if someone had whispered "Death" in her ear.

The doctor was fat and tall, with a white coat and hands covered with black hair. He looked at the child and nodded quickly to me without smiling.

"I have seen her before," he said.

I asked whether she could not have another medical examination. He shrugged and answered, "I can examine her."

He took her by the shoulder and walked with her into the corridor.

"But I tell you I know the case," he added.

She stripped in one of the cubicles and lay down

PART FOUR

on a bed. She seemed used to these examinations. He felt her pulse, listened to her chest and took her temperature. I saw the flat dark wounds, like bruises, under her shoulder and across her chest and stomach. When he got up I asked him whether she could not have a bed in the hospital. I told him that her mother could not look after her properly in a hut with no running water and no indoor lavatory. I remember he looked at the floor. I could not bear the thought of her death. I could not add that to my sum of murders.

"But there are no beds," he said.

"Surely?"

"There are no beds. No beds are available. I am working sixteen hours a day."

I wanted to hit him in the mouth. I shouted, "The child is sick!"

"I have no beds."

He watched me quietly, as he might a nervous patient before the anaesthetic. He was tired, and he was wiser by a thousand deaths than me. He suffered my command, "You must find her a bed. Make a bed out of wood and straw. I am telling you to find her a bed."

"I have a waiting list of hundreds."

He took me by the sleeve and spoke to me in French. "The child will soon be dead. It is better that she should die at home." And he added, "My job is to cure people, you know. However, let her stay one night and go back in the morning."

He had denied me my first chance to make atonement. We shook hands, and I turned away, while the child's mother thanked me again and again with tears

OF SINS AND WINTER

in her eyes. I felt resigned as I left the hospital, and very tired.

My office in Ligourion was a wide and bare room. I ordered a desk to be put there, with chairs, telephones and a carpet. On the wall behind my desk I put up a large-scale map of the area between Nauplion and Nea Epidaurus, and on this map I pinned little red flags to denote which of the villages I had visited.

In this office I received deputations from the villagers, took reports from my own soldiers on their return from missions, listened to disputes between the mayor of one place and the mayor of another, arranged for the collection of food and medicines from Nauplion in lorries, talked over problems with the local traders and farmers, and gave advice to my sentries from the national guard. My work altered nothing, and most of it was invented. I arranged expeditions across the mountains with donkeys, I patrolled the silent country in the dead of night with my armed men, I seldom reached my bed before two o'clock in the morning and I was always up by six. I used myself every minute. Every day I drove from village to village, I ate chops with the mayors, I drank their wine and agreed to have the mountains near them patrolled, I compiled reports about the incidence of tuberculosis, rickets and scabies among the village populations, knowing that these reports were either redundant or unwanted. And when I returned, tired and satisfied, to my office under the mountain with its bustling map I found patient

PART FOUR

villagers at my door, caps in hand, their lives waiting for my nod.

I remember that it was the same in Udine, after the War, when thousands of troops and civilians of every European nationality were coming down from the north into Italy by horseback, cart, tank, car and lorry. I spent the same happy sleepless nights in the camps, and I felt the same bite of conscience move me to do more, then a little more, and then, with the second wind, more and yet more.

For after abstract murder the abstract conscience begins to bite.

In Ligourion I seemed to become whole again. It was like another truancy. But in my real truancy I had been in love. Now, in Ligourion, my wholeness was that of a child of war: that is to say, my love was abstract, it was towards a little girl I hardly knew, to families I could never see, to documents and deputations. I now marked out my love, not with kisses, but with little flags on maps, letters to the mayor of Nea Epidaurus, with documents and deputations. And when I kissed now it was the mouth of a stranger, whose face was a land where I found myself lonely, like the face of a girl in a brothel, the face whose eyes watch you suffer your bitter, dumb secretion. It was as if I had lost the touch in my fingers, as if I were a ghost, to whom no face spoke privately, of whom no one had need. It was as if my abstract murders had cut me off, rendered me abstract too, so that now all my love had to turn into conscience, distilled and neutralised, for all humanity, no longer for one or two in all the world.

OF SINS AND WINTER

I struggled to shake off the ghosts, to make my way back into the world, but the world would not receive me.

One day I drove to Nea Epidaurus, and the crowd drew back as I came into the narrow, cobbled street. I switched the engine off and they were hushed, like the crowd round an ambulance. The mayor of the village came out of a doorway and shook my hand. I remember that he was a small, muscular man with a brown cropped head, like a city workman. He always spoke in a low voice, never moving his tiny, pale eyes. He made a way for me through the crowd and we went into one of the houses together, into a dark room where there were huge flagons of wine, coils of rope, fish-nets and, hanging from a hook in the ceiling, a black pig, shining in the darkness.

He closed the door and pulled the iron bolt across, and at once the crowd outside pushed towards it and tried to hear what we were saying. We sat down at the table and he poured out yellow resin wine into three glasses. He introduced me to an old man with thin light hair, a skin like a child's and eyes clear and blue. This tall old man remained standing behind us while we talked, and whenever we said something with which he agreed he became very excited, spoke fast and took little jumping steps. There was also a soldier from the national guard who leaned against the dark barred window smoking and watching the excited whispering crowd outside.

We made our quiet plans, and shook hands before we left each other. The mayor told me that eighty people, some from this village and some from Arakhnaion, a mountain village in the Arcadian range, had

PART FOUR

been massacred by partisan soldiers earlier in the year. I think he was disappointed to see that I took this calmly. I looked at him under my eyebrows and asked him for proof. His lips became tighter, he lifted his head proudly and said, "You shall see it with your own eyes."

He added that he would take me across the gulf to the place of the massacre, and there I would see the bodies of the victims for myself. I struggled to feel sympathy. I wanted to prove myself warm. But only my ghostly conscience was in attendance. We agreed to meet again.

I went back the following week, early one clear morning. A long motor-boat was at the beach waiting for us, its decks covered with sacks. On the other side of the gulf there were blue mountains, impossible in their early mists. The waters of the gulf were flat and blue, and the motor-boat lay by a wooden promontory, chugging. The villagers were very excited by this excursion and had brought their children down to the beach, but neither the mayor nor the tall old man took any notice of them as they walked towards the landing-stage. They jumped on board with me, and behind us came a plentiful bodyguard of Greek soldiers.

The boat went quietly off, and I looked from one man to another. We took a straight course close under a mountain rising brown and high above us, and as we floated past it, the waters hardly stirring, it was rugged and still. The day was hot and muted, as if it had yet to break open.

The mayor stood at my side peering into the mountain, while the old man was at the nose of the boat

OF SINS AND WINTER

waiting to jump off, though we were quite a kilometre away from the headland where we would harbour.

The mayor looked at me wisely and asked, "Did you see that?"

"No. I only heard a whistling."

He pointed high up into the mountain. "He was warning the others."

I watched a deer leap down from one rock to another, suspended for an instant of time, then I saw a man run, a tiny figure, from behind a boulder to the brow of the mountain and out of sight.

"He may be a shepherd. He may not be a partisan," I murmured.

He smiled and nodded as if this had been a good-natured joke. "He is a partisan."

The boat was moored at the foot of the mountain and we began our climb. The old man did not keep to the footpath. He was light and young; he jumped from one round boulder to the next far ahead of everybody else, until he was at the top. I saw him stop for a rest only once. He was proud and wild, he felt himself to be our leader, because this was the place where he had been taken to be murdered, but he had escaped and was the only one to survive. He knew every inch of the way up to the place of his baptism. He leaped from one boulder to the next with long, young strides, and his hips were spare like a boy's.

The well was wide and deep, and before I reached it I could smell dead people. I put a handkerchief up to my nose and looked over the lip of the well into the massacre, then at the gauntlet thrown in the centre of these unburied people.

PART FOUR

"What is the glove?" I asked. He was searching my face for pity, but I was still calm.

He told me that the glove belonged to the right hand of the man who had done the murder. This man had stood the old people on the lip of the well, plunged a long knife into their necks, then pushed them down.

"Who saw him do it, then?" I asked.

He pointed to the old man.

"It is so dark down there," I said, "one cannot see how many there are."

He looked at me quickly. "There are eighty bodies here."

"But it is so dark. I can make out five, or perhaps six."

"The two villages lost eighty people by this massacre."

He took me to a shrub nearby and bent down and lifted one of its branches. He showed me locks of human hair on the ground, and a high-heeled shoe. He said that the murderers had shaved the heads of two girls from Arakhnaion, then satisfied themselves with them.

I stared at the hair. It was other than what people comb, touch, kiss.

"Did they kill these girls?"

"No. They sent them back to the village."

I was happier.

The mayor said nothing more to me until we were in the boat again, going back across the gulf.

"These men are still in the mountains," he said. "I think they must be captured. Now you have seen it for yourself . . ."

OF SINS AND WINTER

"It is going to be difficult to find anybody in these mountains, even if we knew they were the murderers."

"Could you send out patrols? My soldiers would act as guides."

The old man and the soldiers were standing near us, watching and listening.

"I can manage a patrol," I said. "I can manage seven or eight men."

He turned away. "Seven or eight men. . . . They burned down twelve houses in Arakhnaion."

"My men are tired," I told him. "They did their fighting in Italy. Where would they begin in these mountains? Can you tell me? Have you more than rumours to go on?"

None of them spoke to me. The mayor was sad. They had put their faith in me. The old man looked at me and turned away, enacting his private vengeance, bloody and quick.

I was alone among them on the deck of a motor-boat, and I was afraid.

One of the soldiers said, "Look," and pointed to the splash of a dolphin on the waters. Then they all took up their rifles and began shooting at the great silver fish as it leaped high out of the waves. They shot again and again, growing more and more excited, not troubling to take aim. Their bullets made tiny white momentary flakes on the blue water. But the dolphin went on unharmed, and they put their rifles away.

I touched one of the soldiers on the sleeve and asked him for his rifle. They were all watching me as I took it. I put it up to my shoulder and closed my left eye. I lined up the sights, and when the dolphin

PART FOUR

next made its silver leap I pulled the trigger. We saw the fish fall suddenly on the arc of its leap, tail-first back into the water.

They seemed daunted, looking about them. It was as if I had proved once and for all that I was separate from them, being expert in my murders.

I remember Ligourion exactly. I often used to stroll down to the foot of the village along the light winding road to Nauplion, between still, brute boulders and dusty bushes. The hill stretched away clean and pebbly to the sky itself, with lovely Epidaurus out across the plain, two miles away, among the dark and solemn cypress trees.

Long after we were moved from this village to Nauplion I made another visit there, quite alone. It was night, dark and very cold. The path to Helenie's house was empty, with the mountain behind it. Now that the village was without troops it seemed murderous and too still.

I knocked quietly on the wooden door, and her maid opened it to me. I went carefully down two stone steps into a room with a stove, and as I passed the maid she giggled. She was younger than Helenie, and appeared to share all her secrets. She was proud of this secret meeting between us.

A week before I had gone to their town-house in Nauplion, soon after dusk. On that occasion the maid had put her finger up to her lips when she opened the door to me. I had tiptoed past two lighted rooms from which there came the sound of voices, and she had taken me by the hand to lead me up the winding

OF SINS AND WINTER

staircase. At the top she pushed open the skylight and led me out on to the roof, where there were great leaves in the darkness, and a water-tank, and chimney-pots. She indicated to me that I must stay exactly where I was without making a sound, and I turned to look at the dark sea beyond me, with its prison-island. I waited in the silence until Helenie came. I smelled her eau-de-Cologne as she stood by the dark leaves. She took my hand in the manner of a romantic actress, and for a moment leaned towards me.

"Will you come to Ligourion?" she asked me.

She told me to come to her father's other house, to be there after nightfall and to make sure that no one saw me.

Now I saw her near the stove in the dark room. She smiled at me when I came in and showed me a chair, then she began preparing me coffee. We spoke in French, and the maid watched us with awe from the other side of the room, dreaming more love than there could be. I had first seen Helenie in the village square. I had sent my interpreter down and he had spoken to her. There was no fuss in our love; everything was arranged and understood.

I noticed that she was now less lonely, proud and calm than when I had seen her first. She was more like the other Greeks now, nervous, too quick, with strained eyes. After a time we said nothing to each other and began listening for footsteps outside, in growing fear. The village was silent, and I continually thought of the mountain above us, with great boulders, where people lurked at night.

But I broke the menacing silence. I whispered to

PART FOUR

her, Was it not time for her maid to sleep? Were we to be watched all evening? She turned to her maid with a smile and repeated my words in Greek, almost mocking me, and after a brief conversation the maid rose politely. She shook me by the hand as Helenie told her and with a last glance at her mistress, a con-
niving look, left the room. I was certain now that outside the window there were men, waiting and listening, close to the pane, their feet slipp^{er}ed. It seemed that in nothing could I now find ease, even in love, perhaps least of all in love.

I drew her on to the divan and we kissed. Her kiss was hard and unenchanted, and we stared into each other's eyes, seeing only what was foreign. Only our bodies were to be offered up.

I touched her golden hair and lay at her side. That she was beautiful was a matter of no account, for we had shared nothing. I touched her blouse, but her hand gripped my wrist as I tried to open it. I found in myself no whisper of desire. I pressed against her very hard, pushing her underneath me, and suddenly, as I began to kiss her neck, she pulled back my head and struck me across both cheeks. I drew back, ashamed and furious, and I saw that her eyes were shining. I was about to strike her when the need died. We were both lonely.

I asked her, "Why did you do that?" but she made no reply. She only smiled at me very slightly, with her girl's half-deliberate mystery.

The coffee was steaming on the black stove, and a marble clock ticked slowly. The tablecloth was heavy, mauve and rough. The room was soft, warm, enclosed, a very perfect place for lovers, and the

OF SINS AND WINTER

house lay in a hole among rocks. Midnight had passed, and I began to fear driving back to Nauplion alone, in a country where there were brigands. I had brought no revolver. I thought of this while I lay at Helenie's side.

Sometimes she was tender with me, for a moment. She drew her finger down the side of my face, she kissed me briefly and gently on the brow, but always she seemed to perform her movements. It was as if a watching public existed close by; whereas I sought a message for myself alone.

I had often become excited during the previous week, thinking about our meeting in this house, where we at last would give ourselves up to each other. But now I was lonely, I wanted to leave this place among the rocks, and I wanted to finish my journey across the mountains to Nauplion quickly, driving fast. I wanted to see my own bed, to turn the pages of my own books, to smoke a little before sleeping, staring up at the ceiling, and to remember my truancy again and again, stirring up each gesture and each gaze, finding again the impossible fir-wood and the memorial stone at the top of the hill. Only dreams were my friends. For all else I now seemed powerless. I was cut off, stranded with my burden.

I could not understand this loneliness and fear. So I moved towards her again and again, kissing her neck and cheeks, putting my fingers in the midst of her hair, and speaking to her softly. But her face remained unknown to me.

Next week I might be gone. My regiment moved incessantly. There was neither leisure nor choice for love. Only a local need was granted me, a spasmodic

PART FOUR

burning lust, the shifty need of a slave. She watched my movements very inquisitively, from a distance. I think I was her first spectacle. But I filled the room with no dream of my own. I deserted it every second, aching to be away, and at the end I could hardly find words to speak to her.

I jumped up from the divan. She was astonished by my sudden movement and looked at me with hatred, her lips pursed. I smiled at her and asked her to see me to the door. She did not address another word to me, but simply shook hands with me in the darkness and turned back into the dark room.

When I had closed the door I waited for a moment, then walked up the stone steps to the path. The air was very cold, there was a slight breeze, and moonlight. At the top I turned round again to look at the faint orange light behind her curtain, wondering whether I should go back. But I began walking swiftly along the path towards the centre of the village, with the white boulders gleaming at my side.

The stillness and silence were huge. I might be cut off here, nameless like any stone, eternally deserted, in a place dark and still, with the terrible mountain behind, might surrender in dumb terror with no possible solace issuing out of the domed sky or stony land. All the phantoms of the night loomed up and harried me along the narrow road, paying me back for my act of sex. My loneliness welled up at me from the valley below in cold gusts, gushing back in fuller volume now, after my doomed and broken journey into love, where I must not go. I was beaten and cowed on my way, like a slave who has dared to raise his voice.

OF SINS AND WINTER

At last I fell back into the seat of my car and closed my eyes, worn out, my head bowed over the wheel. Then slowly, fumbling with my fingers in the darkness, I switched on the headlights, and they spread a wide light over the pebbles of the square and along the white road back to Nauplion. I started up the engine and in breathless relief, all surrounded by the quiet throb, I drove smoothly across the pebbles and out on to the white, curving road.

That is why I wanted to weep when I heard the chieftain of Arakhnaion sing: for he was not cut off, but joined magnificently to the world. I remember he lay back on his couch and sang to us, yelling the wild Albanian song, his voice rising and rising and breaking with sorrow and manhood, going to the edge of the sky in a terrible shriek, and his wife in black cloth came across from the hearth and pleaded with him to stop, clinging to his knees and banging him with her white fists as he sang, his head back, his eyes wet and amazed, bravely indulging her pain.

A little before the end of the War we returned to Italy, and when the armistice was signed we were sent hurriedly to the north, to Udine, at the foot of the Alps. There we were given charge of a huge prison-camp for Germans.

And again I felt bite after bite of that same abstract conscience I had known in Greece. Again I tried to struggle back out of my exile, and failed. It was a season of fever and dying dreams, autumnal, restless,

PART FOUR

yet also, like Greece, half-ecstatic. On the first day at this huge camp I was provided with an interpreter, a young S.S. man, and I began to work with the same abandon as in Greece, and with as little effect on the real world.

I remember driving with him one day through the streets of Udine, to the southern edge of the city. When we came to the first Yugoslav sentry I stopped and asked the way to Headquarters. Then I drove on through the strange, deserted back streets, where there were small houses among trees, all of them identical, and yellow rubble in the gutters.

The interpreter had been a student before the War. He wore spectacles, and had clever, watchful eyes. He spoke English perfectly, and was most obsequious in his manner to me. At once he divined a kind of credulity in me, and thought perhaps to advance himself by means of it. He took long strides at my side, and almost took my arm, though the War had not been over more than a week.

We went into one of the small houses, and the Yugoslav officer there showed his anger the moment he saw that I had brought an S.S. man with me. He did not invite me to sit down; this task fell to the interpreter, who politely pulled out one of the wooden seats for me. The officer was short and plump, very quick, with small, grey, shining eyes. He moved his legs about restlessly as the interpreter put his first question.

"Ask him," I said, "whether he will deliver back to us the battalion of German prisoners which his troops diverted from the main road yesterday. His troops have taken prisoners who belong to us."

OF SINS AND WINTER

The Yugoslav could not bear having this German in the room on equal terms with himself, especially an S.S. man. He snapped out his reply, staring at me rudely, and told us he had no intention of giving up any prisoners, and that his country had every right to take them, since they also had fought against the German armies. His lips were thin, almost invisible, and his fury made him white in the face.

The interpreter turned back to me and said, "The officer is rude in his reply. These are uncivilised people, sir."

But I was no longer interested, despite the orders I had received. I realised my own idiocy in bringing an S.S. man to this post and expecting it to be taken as anything other than a most studied insult. I did not care about the prisoners, and I could see that the Yugoslav officer would in any case never give in.

I had fought the same war as this Yugoslav officer, but I was only a scholar of war. I only did a job of murder thoroughly, and afterwards my thoughts were free. I had only lost my temper once, when the fair-haired boy passed me along the white mountain-path, but later I had looked on this as unscholarly conduct, and shameful.

I stared at the Yugoslav, then at the S.S. man, and I realised that between them there was a kind of blood-quarrel to which I was only a calm spectator.

The Yugoslav was deliberately fingering his revolver-holster, making a show of it, as he asked the interpreter with great sarcasm whether or not Hitler had won the War. Then he walked straight across to the door, trembling with fury, and waited to show us out.

PART FOUR

I got up slowly and gave him a friendly smile as I passed him. Smiles were easy for me, because I did not care.

On the way back across Udine, while I drove fast and recklessly, the German told me: "I am ashamed that you should be treated like this by such people, sir. We understand each other. We have both been university students. They do not understand polite requests." And I was affable, as to a fellow-student.

The barracks were four sombre buildings round a huge, dusty quadrangle. S.S. battalions arrived from Austria continuously, during both day and night. The capitulating troops drove quickly, hoping to get to a British camp before Russians or Yugoslavs waylaid them. Usually the officers arrived at the head of the columns in open Mercedes-Benz cars, and often they were dressed in black shining mackintoshes.

The nights were full of rumour. Thousands of Germans asked each other questions in the long, dark, stone corridors. They were to be sent to Canada. They were to be released quickly. They were to be imprisoned on an island for twelve years. The worst of them were to be shot. They came into the camp like conspirators. Only the boys of the Hitler Youth were frightened, with wide eyes, watching the English soldiers cautiously.

My room in the barracks had tall windows and bare, cold walls. Yet I achieved here a kind of happiness. For in this camp by summer there were long, wonderful, hot, sleepless nights, with the flashing of lights against my window, and the barking of a wild, leashed-up bloodhound, and a constant murmuring from outside, and the starting of motors. My task

OF SINS AND WINTER

was to search the officers as they came in, and I was constantly called out of my bed. There were endless messages for me to come at once, on account of a quarrel over food, or a suicide from one of the barrack windows, or the arrival of fresh booty. I would sit in my room with other officers turning over the watches and cameras and portable radio-sets, in a summer-glut of victory.

An open car came through the gates after midnight, and a thick-set officer with dangerous, truculent eyes stepped down as I approached. In the back of the car were women.

"What about the women?" I asked.

Lights were shining on to the courtyard from a great shed behind us, where two ranks of prisoners were being searched.

"What about them?" the thick-set officer asked.

"Are they to stay with you?"

He smiled, mocking me: "What use are women now? Shall we need them where we are going?"

He turned to the other officers and laughed, translating for them what he had just said.

One of the girls stood near the shed weeping, abandoned now by the battalion with which she had travelled. She was a Hungarian, with black hair and a pale, child's face. I saw a young soldier who was with her smile when he noticed her tears. I left the other officers and went up to him.

"Who is she?" I asked.

"Who is she?" The boy tugged at her skirt and giggled. "She is a whore."

I decided to take her away. I led her into the guardroom and opened the door of one of the private

PART FOUR

rooms. I showed her the mattress on the floor and indicated that she should sleep there. I looked back at my own soldiers and told them sternly that no one was to go into this room during the night. I closed the door, fascinated by the presence of women.

At dawn one morning I met the colonel of one of the S.S. battalions in the quadrangle. He was a tall, elderly, handsome man, with white hair. He bowed with great elegance when I asked him about the troops under his command. I suddenly looked into his eyes, and I remember they were blue, still and frightening. They remained absolutely still, and shyness had never visited them.

The sun had just come up, and it was a clear, bright, yellow dawn.

"May I invite you to breakfast in my quarters?" he asked me, with an impeccable pronunciation.

I was young and helpless under this light-blue gaze, and I nodded with a smile. Together we went into one of the dark corridors, past the saluting prisoners, to a small room which had been fitted with old boxes and chairs to make an imitation drawing-room. He showed me to a chair with solemn, aristocratic grace. His back was very straight, and he moved his neck stiffly when he turned his head. We waited while his servant, treading softly on the stone floor, brought us coffee and biscuits.

"I have an English wife," the colonel told me. Then he spoke about his visits to England before the War, and said how unwilling the Germans had been to fight the English. "The Germans and the English should have come together against Russia. We are similar peoples."

OF SINS AND WINTER

I remember in that moment examining my conscience: why had I called them Enemy? I at once thought of the concentration camps. It was a substitute for country or faith,—compassion. I mentioned the concentration camps.

"Ah, there were mistakes," he replied. "I'm a soldier of the old type. Hitler made many mistakes. He should not have gone to war with England."

He eyed me calmly. I sought for words, but the task of murder was done, there was no longer any formula, and I knew nothing about right or wrong. I had chosen for myself alone. Should I speak, in the brisk air of this lovely dawn, sipping coffee in a quiet room, of a crucifixion, of a signing of bonds, of a truant time? It took me five years after this very dawn to learn how to answer such a man, and how to answer such calm eyes with calm eyes. I left him after the second cup of coffee, and no doubt he believed he had just entertained a young man of few words.

I have often read about the concentration camps, about the cells which were so confined that the prisoners could not sit down or even turn more than their heads; about the cells where the prisoner had to bark like a dog for his food; about the men who were frozen almost to the point of death in experiments, then revived by being laid down with naked women for coitus; about the prisoners who were each given a shovel and ordered to strike the man opposite as hard as possible, and those who did not strike hard enough would be hanged; about the carnage by gas and furnace of numberless hordes every day. And each time I read about them I feel the customary

PART FOUR

abstract anger, which yells at me, in a moment of furious spite, that every German under Hitler should have been exterminated, that it was right for whole cities to have been rased by fire, that I was right to want to spit at the fair-haired boy along the white mountain-path. . . . That is how my own will is turned into the will of my epoch, for in this case, by being abstract, my compassion is turned at once into murder. Abstract compassion goes hand in hand with abstract murder, and is its other self. If I pity a *class* of men, a *country* of men, then in my pity must be murder. That is why we are crucified into abstraction. We put out our hand to help and we find the sufferer dead, by that same hand. If you ask for mass benefits, then you must expect mass graves.

For the warders of the concentration camps their victims were things, mere ideas, or one idea, never single and alone like themselves. But whether you persecute people or adore them as an idea, you are still fulfilling your destiny as abstract murderer, for the murder has already taken place, is tacitly understood, in the birth of your abstract idea.

In the barracks, during these first few weeks after the War, I was full of abstract compassion, and I worked fiercely to serve it, but it brought me nothing. It did nothing to bring back the warmth in my fingers.

On a calm, very black night a soldier ran into the guardroom and told me to come. I walked swiftly into the dark, stone corridor and up the stairs, until I heard a woman screaming. I pushed open the door and saw before me a long hall with pillars. Just to the

OF SINS AND WINTER

left of the door were a German officer and a middle-aged woman, sitting quietly over a table, with an oil-lamp between them. The screaming had ceased, and there was only gentle sobbing now, in the darkness far beyond the table.

"What is the matter with her?" I asked them.

The S.S. officer shrugged, and I turned to the middle-aged woman. "Are you German?"

She nodded and told me that the other woman was frightened.

"Why frightened?"

I was suspicious. I glanced about the great empty hall and stood still, listening for the voices of other men who might be there.

"She is Italian," the woman at the table told me. "She is very excitable, and she has been calling out for her husband."

I walked towards the darkness and spoke to the woman in Italian. She was lying on a camp-bed. I told her to get up and bring her blankets. I went back to the table and looked sternly from the officer to the German woman while I waited. I was aware of being mocked, but of this I could not be sure.

"I believe someone has been trying to interfere with her," I said.

But the officer at the table shook his head, pouting with too much solemnity. Then the Italian woman came out of the darkness towards the table, shaking and sobbing, her hair falling in shining, wet strands about her cheeks. She whimpered that she was all alone, that she was not one of the Enemy, that she was Italian and therefore free, that she was frightened by so many soldiers.

PART FOUR

"My husband is a doctor," she told me.

"Where is he?"

"In the south, I believe."

"Then why are you here?"

"I was in Austria."

I looked into her eyes and at her wet, rather ~~sallow~~ face, and I thought, An officer's whore. But this may not have been the case. It may have been that her husband was a military doctor attached to one of the S.S. battalions, and that he had managed to escape during the first days of the capitulation.

The German couple watched us go out of the door in silence. They simply leaned on the table, watching us, and it seemed to me that there was a slight smile on the officer's face.

I took her to the guardroom and showed her the closet which had been occupied by the Hungarian girl. I turned back to my own soldiers, unable to smile, and told them that they were not to touch her, that they were not to go near the room. I was aware of conspiracies in the dark places of this prison-camp, of murder in the promiscuous silence. My eyes accused my soldiers: *rapists*. But only I stood wrapt in doubt. They were simply sentries on night-duty at a prison-camp, and that was how they returned my accusing gaze.

I left the guardroom heavy with suspicion. The War had fallen apart. I was meaningless. There must be logs to keep afloat by. Everything was lost. In this camp I realised my freedom. I was under no further obligation. Everything was before me to choose freely. Have you honour? But nothing is incumbent on you. Do you talk of duty, honour, obligation? Do

OF SINS AND WINTER

you dress yourselves with these elegant fancies from the past? Nurse your honour, if you will. But only if you will.

I went stumbling from the guardroom with the quiet eyes of my men upon me, and I knew that now I was alone. It came like the word of God. The War was over. I am virtuous, if I will it. I am clean, if I will it. So much confusion thrust upon me a will.

All around the search-shed the ground was covered with banknotes. A small quadrangle was covered from end to end with them, in some places a foot deep. There were millions upon millions of Mark notes, and sometimes a wind caught them and whirled them up. One kicked one's way through them as through profuse autumn leaves. The first news was that these German notes were valueless, and all prisoners were stripped of them. There were packs of new notes which amounted to fortunes, still in their rubber bands.

Late one morning I passed this quadrangle and saw a German soldier bending down and turning the notes over, alone, dreaming the fortunes he might have had. I shouted at him furiously. The sight of him bending down like that made me feel an instant disgust. But he only turned and growled something back at me. He could not leave these notes, and he continued bending down, with an extraordinary determined look. I ran up to him and brought my stick down over his shoulders, and only then did he begin to move away. I was exhausted and sick. Every gesture I made was empty of meaning. I was not fit to be a creature of peace.

I would stand before the S.S. officers in the guard-

PART FOUR

room and again and again, as each new battalion came in, I would turn to the interpreter at my side and say, "Tell them I am about to address them as gentlemen. We do not wish to search them personally, but they are bound by their honour to give up their binoculars, their fire-arms, their ammunition, their maps, their compasses, and any military documents they may have."

They would look at me with agreeing smiles. Some of them were tall, flushed, healthy, blond young men, like keen animals. I spoke my speech to the interpreter with a fathomless apathy, knowing that they recognised in me a fellow-Aryan. I listened to my own word "honour" as if I were a foreigner to it, mocking myself gladly.

One or two of the officers came into the camp bleeding and bandaged. They complained to me like outraged gentlemen that they had been stoned by members of the Jewish Brigade on their way down from Austria, and feared for their fellow-officers. They claimed that this was illegal conduct. I gazed at their wounds with sympathy, then changed, withdrawing my sympathy by an intellectual decision. Standing in front of them, I underwent a kind of hot giddiness. I turned to the interpreter and said, "Tell them I hope it won't happen again, but that they are lucky not to be massacred for what they have meted out to the Jews."

But these were only the words of a scholar, a cold edict, and I turned my back in disgust, feeling that for a moment I had been robbed of my freedom.

I called aside one of the younger officers and took him to the table, out of earshot to the rest. I

OF SINS AND WINTER

remember looking about me to see whether my own soldiers were listening. The German had blue eyes, and he looked into my face closely, with an intimacy which was almost sexual.

"You have a good camera there," I said. It was hanging round his neck in a leather case. "I'm going to be honest with you. I could take that camera from you by force, and it would be confiscated like all the others. But first I don't like to take things by force, and secondly I would like to have that camera myself. Therefore I'm going to ask you to make me a gift of it. If you refuse, I shall see that it remains in your possession."

The officer smiled. The look he gave me was full of understanding. Slowly he lifted the camera-strap over his head and then, making of it a little ceremony of blessing, hung it round my neck.

"This is because I like your manner," he said.

"Have you given up everything else?"

"Of course," he replied, then walked back to where the others stood.

Yes, honour appealed to me. The word itself had an infallible music for me. I wished always to be honourable. For myself, alone. Even God is for one man alone. We are each of us in a great solitude. I was beginning to discover in this camp how much the world was me.

The following day, standing near the table where all the surrendered articles were laid, I heard someone click his heels behind me. I turned and saw a private of one of the S.S. battalions standing to attention, hatless. He had a thick map-case under his arm. I raised my eyebrows at him truculently, and

PART FOUR

he told me in broken English that he was the officer's servant.

"Which officer?"

He mentioned the word "camera", and I realised at once. I watched the soldier open his map-case and take out a pile of intelligence-maps for Italy and Austria.

"He forgets these."

I looked into the boy's eyes, pouting: "*Forgets them?*"

But then I smiled and said, "Thank you," overcome once more with weariness. I laid the maps down with the others. Perhaps it was true, that the officer had found them by accident, in a trunk which had not been opened in the hurry of the first search.

Only in battle, unshaven, my boots muddy and my clothes soiled, did I find in myself a soldier. Only then was I at ease. Only then were my orders direct, like a sudden prophesy. For only then was the brain laid asleep.

During one of the hot afternoons a crowd gathered round two women in a corner of the huge quadrangle. These women were Russian, and had been screaming hysterically. I stood watching them from a distance, at the back of the crowd. I looked about me and then recognised one of the German women standing close by. I called her over. She was the middle-aged woman who had been sitting over a table with the S.S. officer, when I had been called to fetch the Italian. There was a lechery in her eyes which appealed to me. She seemed calm, and quite unafraid of me.

"What is the matter with these women?" I asked her.

I suspected her of doing quiet mischief in this

OF SINS AND WINTER

area of the prison-camp, for no reason that I knew. She said that the women had been told that they would be sent back to Russia. They had come away from Russia with German troops, and they were terrified because they were traitors and might be shot. I looked at her while she spoke, at her hard and lined skin, and cracked lips. I listened to her words suspiciously, for this was the second time I had found her close to hysterical women. The camp was strange. There was dust everywhere. We were standing in the hot sunlight. Troops were jumping out of the lorries behind us, in hundreds. There were cries of anger, orders and whistling. The Russian women were looking about them, still in tears, talking very quickly to anyone, though not a person there understood them. I saw mockery and conspiracy everywhere.

"What was your work?" I asked her.

She answered me clearly and slowly, staring into my eyes and yet beyond them. I caught most of the German words and understood her to say that she had been a secretary of the Gestapo. But I am not sure about this. I thought of her as cruel and liked to look into her face. There was order in this face, the order of coldness. She leaned against the wall with her hands in the pockets of her jacket, very much at ease. It was I who prolonged the conversation, while she was calm and negligent, looking about her. Suddenly she would break off and shout something to one of the passing soldiers. It was as if I were a visitor here, a polite visitor on sufferance. She was the victor.

I never saw her after this. She must have left the camp the following day. Rarely did prisoners stay

PART FOUR

more than two days. Sometimes people seemed to disappear, swallowed up in the out-going convoys. I had told both the Hungarian girl and the Italian woman not to leave the camp with German troops, as prisoners, but both of them had gone by dawn the following day. My idea was to set them free. I jumped up quickly one morning, soon after five o'clock, happy to be taking the Hungarian girl to the civilian camp, but when I pushed open the door in the guardroom I found only the mattress and the folded blankets. I turned to my soldiers to ask them where she had gone, but they were the new day-guard and so knew nothing. I searched the women's quarters but they were empty. There was no trace of her name on the camp-records.

One day I drove to a civilian camp on the north side of the city where there were people of every race, both middle-class people and peasants. In one of the rooms there were great piles of clothing which had been sent from England and America. An idea had occurred to me. I decided to give some of the clothing to the Russian children in my own camp; these children had arrived in the baggage trains of the U.S. battalions. I drove them to the civilian camp and chose several pairs of shoes for them. I did this in order to see the look of gratitude in the eyes of their two mothers.

The children stared at me in terror as I went through the antics of compassion. They stood close together, never daring to open their mouths, watching my smiles as if they were a performance. Their faces made no reply; they were wrapt in contemplation. They knew the truth.

OF SINS AND WINTER

Children go quickly to the truth because they are without possessions. They discard everything in the fullness of time. The girls standing before me were in rags, and they were pale. They were destitute. But yet they were bereft of nothing.

I went into one of the offices to consult a Canadian in charge of the clothing. This man was short, plump and jovial. He greeted me as if I were an old friend, and his ideal was clearly to be a personality. I asked him whether some of the clothing could not be sent to the prison-camp, since there were so many women and children arriving in the baggage-trains.

"Take just what you like," he said, and I agreed to send a lorry the following day. He advised me to take something for myself, telling me that some of the clothing was too good for displaced people, and that he had already sent his own wife a beautiful pair of shoes and a handbag. I at once became furious, but said nothing. The plan formed itself in my mind of betraying this jovial fellow.

I drove back to the prison-camp very fast, so that the children behind me gasped. The next day they had disappeared from the camp, and I forgot about the clothing. Instead, I went to a shop in Udine and bought some film, and began to interest myself in photography. I would sit on my bed in the camp opening and shutting my camera, and touching its tiny silver levers, like a man soft in the brain.

In Austria, where we were moved a few weeks later, someone almost succeeded in nursing me back to time and place. I now had little work, and no

PART FOUR

responsibilities. The most serious work was the grooming of the horses. So there was leisure and future for love. But the murder was too deep, and though I found again the private message of a smile, and gazes for myself alone in all the world, yet I left her still an exile, and at last a stranger. I remember we used to talk until midnight, with the heavy and long curtains drawn across the window. There would be no noise from the rest of the house. The room was soft and dark, and most of it was taken up by a grand piano, and we would sit at the table together in the hot half-darkness talking in whispers. It was strange how I first came to this house. I was looking for a new room one day, and with a feeling of absolute sureness I went towards this house among trees, where I might have been healed.

I had a room on the second floor, with a lovely window and a tree breathing against it at night and the gravel path close by where footsteps were never heard. She was tall and dark-haired, a girl who dreamed and smiled to herself. In love she was always the sufferer, and this she bore with a bowed head, smiling a little to herself. Her eyes made me less lonely. This was the first time such a thing had happened since I stepped down on to the beach at Salerno. The other women had only been faces. But we recognised each other at once. At first I thought I had found my home, that these were to be the last of my days of exile. The War was over, a further truancy was promised. We would walk in the shrouded woods, under the black and intricate arches of twigs. We would drink tea together. We would notice things together—birds, the sun by

OF SINS AND WINTER

evening and the dusk coming behind us, the muffled cattle-bells. We would stamp our feet and hurry into the cafés across the hardening snow, our breath billowing out. We would gaze out the Enemy in each other—easy task, because neither of us had really believed in that. We would look at books, tell warm tales about childhood, and stand still at the sight of squirrels in the wood.

I spent spring-nights, hardly sleeping, the first since the spring-nights of my truancy, full of leaves and the moon. But an imitation; an Indian summer.

The autumn became colder. We would walk in the woods above the village. Sometimes we sat on the trunks of felled trees in a leafy, hallowed, silent clearing where men had been working, and sometimes we walked to the top of a hill, above one of the raging valleys, to watch the sunset. It was a season full of rain, and all along the gravel path there were leaves.

One Sunday we drove together to a wide, black valley twenty or thirty kilometres beyond the village. It was very cold now, and there was a slight sleet. We wrapped scarves round our heads and laid two blankets across our knees. The road was bare of traffic, and horses all the way, and soon after noon we turned on to a narrow, difficult path which led up to an inn. We left the car in one of the fields and went into the hot beer-room.

The only other people there were four youths, two boys and two girls, sitting by the stove. They were singing and laughing, and one of them was playing an accordion. We sat down near a window overlooking the snowy valley.

Their singing seemed touched with bitterness,

PART FOUR

deliberately loud and uneven, a young defiance against losing the War. We could hardly talk at the window, so deafening was their noise. They sang at the top of their voices, banging their heavy-booted feet on the wooden floor, while the accordionist played with a kind of frowning violence, swinging his body to and fro as he pushed and pulled at the bellows. They laughed continually, whistled, jumped up and down in their seats, rapped on the table for more beer, seemed never to want to pause for recollection. And I remember that as I watched them, silent by the window, I began to envy them. For they were free and unclassified in their sweaters, these youths, not of the burden of the world. Yet I was their conqueror.

I remember I felt chained and bound, shorn of my singleness, a miserable inmate of the world again, a ghost in a khaki jacket with no originality in his love, being one of very many, who moved and thousands of others moved, who sighed and they sighed, who cried out and they cried out. In nothing was this khaki ghost alone.

They were alone, and I was public in all my songs and my words. Even when I sat alone with the girl in a silent, hot room, the stove crackling before us, she was powerless to draw me down to time and place. The love we made was unsatisfactory, quick, without relish; not drawn out long, voluptuous, making of rooms a temple of pleasure. It was as if all about us there were ghosts, and we were clinging to each other for fear.

It was strange how always, when I drew near to a woman and kissed her, every whisper of desire left

OF SINS AND WINTER

my body. The love I made was quick and anxious, frowning and in obedience solely to an idea. Again and again I found that after a first embrace I would only want to lie limp and frail at a woman's side, as if I could not reach out to her, cease to be separate, but was doomed in my exile; for the act of love born of long hours of adoring, without a limit of time, with ease and talk—this I could not have.

We left the inn just before dusk and drove back through heavy sleet. In my room I pulled back her hair with my right hand, holding it in a bunch behind her neck, so that her ears were bare, and I was astonished when I saw her flat nose and high cheekbones, a face so different from what it appeared under long hair. At last I saw *her*; and we were strangers. I watched her face for a moment and said with a laugh, "You have a Mongolian face!"

For I knew in this moment that she was not of my animal kind, and that in her warmth I could not kindle back a soul. There could be no truancy yet. That was the work of months and years.

I am writing this in Mondsee, in the room with the doves outside. Three weeks after I saw her for the last time I was no longer a soldier. That was at the end of 1945.

Well, I have remembered all those murders, one by one. Everything begins to feel lighter now. I shall move from here. Strange, how much clearer I feel. I can remember things which puzzled me at the time of their happening, and now they are clear to me.

PART FOUR

I know now why I was ashamed when I stepped down from the aeroplane in Damascus, seven years ago. I remember I held on to the sides of the cockpit as we went up, not believing in the security of the straps. I gripped hard as the silver brittle giant rushed up across the sky and then began diving and turning over and over, the earth falling under my head. The machine fell and fell towards the earth, then suddenly, almost seeming to touch the sand dunes, leapt up again. I held on to the sides of the cockpit until my knuckles were white. But everything changed the moment the pilot in the forward cockpit told me over the earphones to take hold of the joystick and guide the 'plane myself.

• I took it with my right hand, then ceased holding the side of the cockpit with the other. And now I began to put away my earth-self; I was no longer cautious or afraid. I ceased to care, sitting easily in my seat. A moment before, my body was tensed as if somehow I were the machine's servant and must participate in its effort. But now the seat became my armchair. I became cold, since I was now the master of the giant's flight; it went harmoniously with me. I gently tipped the wings down to the left, very gradually, as we lost height. The lightest of my touches I could see in the gentle fall of the wing on my left, as the pilot said to me over the earphones, "Very professional". It was a light floating gradual movement, and I was no longer afraid of this monster with its eyes put out. For I was only technically concerned with the falling movement of the wing, only my brain and fingers were working. I was like a man at his desk dreaming power. I was calm, my

OF SINS AND WINTER

fingers were moving only slightly, yet a vast machine was bearing me along the sky.

I watched an Arab ploughing his field below. As the 'plane rose away from the earth again the field lost its furrows, the Arab at his plough became an interesting mark, the field became a yellow square, and the earth no longer had any meaning for me except as an interesting target, that is to say, as an idea, as something which made no demand on me, did not call me out by name. It had become abstract.

When we landed the pilot jumped down from his cockpit and came across to me.

"I could teach you to fly in a week, no, really I could," he said with a laugh.

I turned away and began unstrapping my parachute harness, and it was now that I felt ashamed. For I wanted to be bad at flying; I wanted to be bad at soaring away all the time. Let me be in the city rased by fire, than above, dispensing murder.

I know now why I stared so long at the young soldier in the churchyard of St. Peter's at Salzburg. He was wandering from place to place slowly, with his silver camera, waiting for a subject. I watched him as he stopped to take photographs of the tombstones and the little chapel, then of the entrance to the catacombs, where there was a black gate, and behind it skulls. Everything he saw he studied closely, with a view to making a photograph of it. I remember he stood still and cocked his head to one side, then he held up his electrical exposure meter. He seemed to me a musing, quiet, tender man. Already he could

PART FOUR

see everything in this churchyard in its embalmed state, when the photographs would be clipped into albums and homely people would smile. He embalmed everything slowly and carefully, with a wonderful tenderness, alone and unaware of being seen. All these monuments disowned him. Again and again they silently proclaimed, You do not belong to us. They were the background to nothing in his life. They were dead objects, as the marriage certificates, the trinkets and the photographs of first communion were dead objects for me, were mementoes of a warmth and quickness long since gone, when I found them in Italian farmhouses.

Part 5

THERE is suddenly a cry, someone laughs. A tap is turned on in another of the rooms. Every sound I hear is good. I am in Vienna. It is like coming out into the light again.

Last night I woke up again and again, just to enjoy the feel of the world. I spend hours in the cafés here, astonished to be among people again, with my burden set down. The cafés, the cathedral behind my window, the park at the side of the Hapsburg palace, the sulking palace itself—none of them are dark with my memories. They have gone. I am free.

I am cleared of my own accusation, *murderer*. The judges are no longer looking in my direction. I can talk and smile again. At Bleitnau I must have walked about like a ghost! So there is light in this city: I hung back in Mondsee, near Salzburg, waiting for the sign.

It happened at Leoben, where I spent one night on my way up to Vienna. I wondered whether I should turn south there and see the inn again where the boys in sweaters had laughed and sung, see the house again with the gravel path and the trees breathing against my window, and all the thick valleys in leaf, before the autumn colours and the cold reminding wind came. I wondered! whether I should do this, looking for my home again, instead of taking the train to Vienna straight away.

My answer was sudden and clear: *No*. I remember

OF SINS AND WINTER

standing at the window of my hotel room. Leoben was a town in her truancy. My window overlooked the river, and I listened to its washing. Below me under the wall lay a cobbled alleyway, and sometimes a man or dog went by, and the clock-bell tapped the arches. I said *No*. I no longer wanted to find my home, or look again at the baptismal places.

I was happy to be alone and homeless, because only now was I happy with myself. Strange, that there in Leoben, where the answer came to me in such a plain voice, there should be no ruins, and no mark of them in people's faces.

Ever since I climbed the hill from Bleitnau and stood in front of the house with the wooden Christ, I have been staring at the blood on my hands and asking, Is this because you have some special wickedness in yourself? I punished myself with these murders, pursued and harried myself in my sleep, certain that I alone was to blame. Frau Glassner, the half-mad Philip, the miner and the tom-boy daughter—they could give me no secret. For there was no secret to be divulged, except in myself. The mystery was myself; not the Enemy or the War, but the murder in myself.

Now I see the murder in everything, not in my hands, but fated in my life, and taught me at the very beginning, when I was a child. Here in Vienna my childhood seems very clear. It comes with every sound from the street below, every movement of birds in the gables. That was where it all began.

Opposite my hotel-window there are yellow ware-

PART FIVE

houses. It is very hot: a Sunday morning. When I woke up I heard music. It was jazz from below, from the cinema under the hotel. I woke up suddenly, and at once I remembered the hot Sundays in the place where I was born. There was the long, bare street, silent and empty, a corridor into nothing. It was a treeless world, desolate like the aftermath of battle. Indeed, I remember it as a kind of battlefield, a place of much dying, only no shells broke the silence of the mortuary.

On Sunday mornings we would get up later, and breakfast would be bigger than usual. There would be men in the street with silver scarves tucked into their shirts, and sometimes cloth caps. They would close their little doors and walk down the street for a drink of beer, and sometimes they would knock at another door to bring out a friend. The pub at the bottom of the long street gathered and gathered people until at one o'clock it clamoured and the garden was full.

In summer the windows of this prison were open at the bottom. It was part of the meaning of summer, that the windows overlooking the back gardens should be open at the bottom. The ice-cream man would pass and call out, pedalling slowly, alone in the street. How did one so much as breathe? I used to look out into the long street and see bricks, slate and iron railings, and all about me there would be these silent, monumental things, and beyond this corridor into nothing there were other corridors into nothing. Half a mile from my childhood bed there was the dark railway station, then a cemetery, a huge white grotto under a hill stretching as far as a child

OF SINS AND WINTER

could see. The station was nicknamed *The Boneyard* for this reason.

Voices echoed in the street. Shoes tapped as they passed. A piano would play out of tune from across the road, an idiot's jangle. The sparrows played along the gables. A motor-cycle would start up two streets away. A train would slow down at the nearby station, train after train throughout the day. The loud-speakers would echo across the back gardens. And on Sunday afternoon, when the street slept, there was a silence which could not be borne, and a heavy sense of desertion and loneliness came slowly upon me, as madness might come. And I waited for it alone, and suffered it.

Nothing grew. There was no peace, only the quiet of the burial-ground. If I went close to my window I would see evergreen hedges below, daunted and covered with dust, and the railings. On the other side of the street there were the same houses, a long line of them under the same roof, endlessly repeated. When it was hot and the sun shone, without cloud, the street was like a corridor under glass, something indoors and made by men, smaller than life, a heavy, brute monument in memory of nothing. Once when I was ten or eleven I looked out of my window on such a day and had a moment of ridiculous love for it, because it was like an enclosed and luxuriant hot-house, though nothing could grow there.

In the back gardens trees grew and had leaves, but they were dead, and the growing of plants was a folly.

I would hear the front door close and footsteps die away, then I would be alone, and would wait for my doom. I would read a book, trying to be lost in it, or

PART FIVE

I would potter about the room. But all the time I was waiting for the loneliness to work under my skin and into my veins, I was waiting in terror for the giddy fit to begin. The clock on the mantelpiece in the back room ticked, and the gardens were silent. I would go up the passage to one of the other rooms and look out into the street, and then suddenly there would be this slipping within me and I would stand still, white, bodiless, with nothing familiar left in my world, panic-stricken and trembling. I could not get back into the world.

I did not lose the sense of touch or sight, and I could have spoken sanely to anyone. It was simply that I seemed to float, I was no longer part of the world, and everything had disowned me. I used to close my eyes and strike my forehead quickly with the palm of my hand, I used to bang on the floor with my fists, crying out to the woman underneath at the top of my voice, though she never gave any sign of hearing. I used to run out into the street just to grasp someone, white and panting. I would run up to them and take them by the coat, and slowly I would come back to the world, tugged back by their watching normal eyes, I would stand there and slowly return, happy to have been granted my return. People would take my arm and shout, "What is the matter? What is the matter?"

These little seizures continued until my fifteenth or sixteenth year, when I achieved my freedom from the prison of streets.

Sometimes, on Saturday evenings, I was taken to a fun-fair, but I think all the warm gas-jets, the deafening music as the roundabouts turned, the

OF SINS AND WINTER

perilous swings, the masks, hardly brought a smile to my face.

At the end of the street where I was born one could see, far away, a quiet lawn and trees. My eyes were often turned towards this enchanted green opening at the end of the corridor, towards the one place in all my world which breathed, breathing grass and trees. It was the free ground outside the prison.

But inside the prison black hearses came every now and then to take away the new dead. I used to watch them breathlessly from behind the curtain upstairs. Or sometimes cream ambulances came and a little crowd gathered near the open door. The children would gather there first, then the women, with bare arms folded.

And rumours would be whispered in the street. "Mrs. Thompson has been taken bad again . . ." (*malignant cancer*). "I see young Sid took a turn for the worse . . ." (*tuberculosis of the lung*). "Poor little chap, he is only nine, they wheel him about in a chair, his head is the size of a football . . ." (*cerebral meningitis*). "Victor came off his bike again round the Bend last night. I said to his mother, do you think it is right when he shakes like that?" (*congenital paralysis of the right leg and arm*). "It happens every month, she brings everything up . . ." (*neglected apsis of the womb*). "I don't know how she got him to hospital, he was sick all the way . . ." (*burst duodenal ulcer*).

The pavements were flat and dead, there were no messages for myself alone. I was anybody, any child in this prison of streets. I was one of too many people.

PART FIVE

We lived in the same rooms in the same houses, we worked the same hours and travelled the same routes, we walked the streets under somebody else's orders, and the whip of the invisible warders was behind us all, and nothing was warm in our world, nothing grew, it was somebody else's idea. So I became giddy, being detached from everything about me, like a pure brain; for my world consisted of huge, empty, mute objects, and nothing answered my touch. I lived in the lap of sterility. I became quite used to these "giddy fits" and thought of them simply as one of my own private abnormalities, little knowing that they would disappear when I had been released from the prison of streets.

•The wind did not speak in the trees at night, there were no witches in the black sky, nothing was small enough for fools and children. What do slaves tell their children? There were no processions in the streets. The old were not wise, for the past was dead in this world; it could not be seen in people's faces. But there were men whose small eyes turned carefully in their heads, and of these I was afraid. For they were on the side of the warders, bending down and baring their backs in order to be whipped, being abject conformers; they were those who believed in the factory and who were impatient to send out their young into them.

The streets whispered into the ears of children, and this was their only teaching, that there was nothing in all the world but ugliness, in all the stars but a sickness increasing. There was not even God to open the door into the sky. One must not look up into the sky.

OF SINS AND WINTER

The fools and children knew this to be the truth because it was proved by everything that happened before their eyes, by the trams scraping in the street, the trudging slaves, the inglorious shop-fronts and the smell from the canal where no man walked. It was a truth very adequate to their world.

The sound of the noon-hooter brought a chill into me. There were white-faced men hurrying home, a dry, hot smell of fish-and-chips in the streets, people scuttling out of the factory yards, for there was only an hour to spare, and the trams stopped to draw them in and stopped to spill them out.

We were neither hard nor tough, but dreamers. Dreaming was proper in the prison of streets, for it was safe. Only deeds had to be denied. To everything the prison said, "Impossible", and advised a further dream. For hours the women would sit dreaming of money. Heaven was money. It was their ticket into the real world.

We were exiles.

Our movements were strict and mechanical from the habit of obeying, our accents were brief and clipped from the terror of our warders, our tastes were craven and uniform from being outcasts to all pleasure and health. If these streets could be turned to grey-white deathly rubble, and left there until sweet lawns and shrubs grew over them. . . . Walking the prison of streets again I have often felt a sudden panic that I might be dragged back, once more a dumb and ghostly inmate, scourged by the same loneliness.

I remember morning after morning in these streets, going through all my childhood, when I

PART FIVE

woke with the same dull warning of evil and death and fathomless misery, dark and full of tears, the same dreadful suffocation. Of my childhood, a sullen dirge preceding my real life, I remember hardly anything, because so little made me turn my head. The memories I have are mostly of sudden fear or of visits to the country, and these latter are primeval, serenely green, and full of a gentle, shining benevolence for me.

Strangely, music first showed me the way out of the prison. It was free of charge. It came along the air. To no time or place did it belong. It took me beyond words and monumental things, and I knew what there was in the beginning, and in the beginning there was music putting forth out of the silence, and it was with God; in these moments I found my will.

But the War gave me a healthy body. It rescued me. During my prison-service I was listless, my body was only a kind of moving vehicle for my terror and dreams. But the War made me run, climb mountains and stay out in the cold, and gradually I watched my body grow, away from the death-kingdom. No wonder I determined in the War to put aside nostalgia, never to pity myself or confess unhappiness. No wonder I seized that chance of being in the open, learning swiftness like a beast. To the question, Are you happy or unhappy? I did not know what to answer. I was neither. I was simply active.

Only in war did I become necessary. Only in war did I find a use for my hands. And a million others made their Odyssey into the splendid provinces of murder, from just such a place. I think it is not

OF SINS AND WINTER

accidental that we should have found our health in murder.

I remember as a child forcing myself to read hour by hour ghostly sentences about Xenophon, to read about oil deposits in a foreign country, about the foreign policy of Castlereagh, trying to divine the secret of the world outside the prison, believing that the ghostly words might lead me out by the hand into the fabulous places. This was the first part of my grooming in the ways of abstraction. The War took me away from the study at the age of nineteen, and went on with that grooming in the open air.

I remember the ghostly voices of the radios going out across the back gardens in the prison of streets by night, especially in summer, coming from the lighted windows still open at the bottom. Like all things spoken to the prisoners, they were spoken to no one in particular. No private message. Every man had his little dead box of ghostly voices, telling him of the fabulous places where he would not go, places where men had real lives. We could be multiplied again and again, we whistled the same tunes, we could be talked to with one voice, we would answer with one voice. We were cut off, predictable like ideas: and our words seemed unreal, bereft of any legend, oddity or foolish heat. Only the old brought a legend with them, a lovely wayward rune; their quiet reminiscent words rocked their children into a long half-sleep, primeval and fabulous. But for the young, ideas and the exchange of ideas.

What is abstract murder but the way exiles kill each other?

PART FIVE

Every day here I am reminded of our destiny by what I see. Yesterday it was a man sitting opposite me in the tram. He was staring at a young woman next to him, but at her body, not into her eyes. He had a large, plump face, with eyes tiny as if they were captive in the flesh, momentarily fluttering with a sudden tired life, and a rather yellow, sweating skin. I watched him as he stared down first at her arms, then at her breasts. He appeared to be fascinated by the rising and falling of her blouse, and when she got up to leave the tram he leaned forward and stared down at her legs, boring and boring darkly into her flesh. Yet there was on his face an implacable, mute look of murder. He would give nothing, only take from her the bounty of the flesh. She was a thing, and he the silent, ghostly watcher who murdered in order to love. It seems to me that the city is full of silent watchers.

At night I walk along the silent, cobbled side-streets of Vienna, under the immense, dark, shuttered houses. No noise comes from the Rotenturmstrasse. It is too mute and still, because it is past. Only the past exists in this city, amid ruins and the inmates go among the huge, lazy monuments like strangers, democrats without a name, dwarfed by a stone world they did not make.

The imperial palace is like a pouting beast, its useless paws drawn up underneath, drowsily watching the hordes come to within a foot of its gates. The cobbled courtyards, with their sentinel boxes, are empty and silent.

OF SINS AND WINTER

But I'm free, and I can shoo away the past. Today I wanted to celebrate my release,—at first I had no idea how. But I took a tram towards the Bridge of the Red Army and stopped at the Prater. It had to be something swift and sudden.

I walked along the chipped roadway to the fair-ground. The lanes between the stalls were empty. A few people were sitting in one of the cafés. The music from the loudspeakers was ruthless and sad, going in and out of the lonely stalls across the dying air. There were great flat spaces from which the ruins had been cleared away, for here there had been battle after battle between the Red Army and the last S.S. troops. The ghost-train was empty, and there were no children crying out inside. I saw a solitary child on the dipper, and above the fairground the Big Wheel turned slowly again and again.

Each time I passed one of the shooting galleries the owner tried to attract my attention. He called over to me intimately, like a man with something dirty to sell, offering me the rifle. He smiled and called out to me, quietly, singling me out from the other strolling people, "*Bitte, bitte, mein Herr.*"

But I took no notice. I walked on a few yards and stopped at the switch-back. I went into the entrance and paid my money. The plump woman behind the grille leaned forward and asked me whether I would go round once or twice, and I told her once. The cars were in a little siding, one behind the other. They were silver cars on a track which looped and turned sharply, and there was a rail I could hold on by. An attendant wheeled one of the cars out of the siding and politely took my ticket.

PART FIVE

I clung to the rail in front of me and the car went slowly up the steep track. At the top it would suddenly be flung forward, and I waited. It went slowly up, rattling and swaying. It seemed to stay for a moment at the top, and I waited tensely, my knuckles white with clinging to the rail; then it fell and fell sheer into the dip, I was pushed back, I made a cry, I laughed, my mouth wide open, I clung and clung to the rail, the world yielded beneath me, I fell and fell without foothold, and the car rose again, grinding cruelly, mad and owning me; my will was dead, I was flung back and forth, the car ripped and flew along the track round and round, I cried out again and again, a kind of happy appeal, and the world ceased and there was nothing in all the world save me and my falling sky. Then the car stopped, I got out, walked quickly to the exit and jumped down the steps to the road.

I looked about me and walked fast, all my body light, new and able. I was hungry and hurried towards the frankfurter stall near one of the tram stops; I was brisk and light and all the world had tumbled off my shoulders in the silver car.

I can see again. It is like the gum being taken down from my eyes. In Bleitnau and Salzburg I was in a blindness. It was dark, dark. Everything touchable was dark. Every sight was mixed with my murders and my ghosts. I walked like a man with his eyes put out.

But this city I see is true. My eyes feel naked and cool, and marvellously clear. I suck colours into me,

OF SINS AND WINTER

as if they were for the first and truest time. The dark self is cancelled out.

It is the end of June, and a hot day, when nothing seems to stir. This morning I went to the palace at Schönbrunn and walked slowly through the grounds because of the heat, between the quiet trained shrubs, under leaves which distilled the air to coolness. There were statues hidden among the trees. I came upon them suddenly; there was moss on their shoulders, and the rain had made long tracks down their chests.

I walked towards the palace and saw a red-coated squirrel come out on to the path. The leaves did not move, and the palace was shining beyond the shrubs. There was no one about. The squirrel was still for a moment, her front paws raised. She looked at me, then sniffed at the gravel path, crouched like a rat. She came towards me and I stopped. But then she turned away, listening closely to all the silence. She was still again, her great brush arched up, and she glanced at me quickly. Then with soundless impossible leaps she went to a tree and climbed to the top. I watched the branches of this tree for several minutes, but I did not see her again.

I went into the vast shining palace. I paid for my ticket and went up to one of the ante-rooms where people were waiting for the guide. After a few minutes he came. He was dressed in a long white coat, an old man, tired and hunched, and he carried an ancient bunch of keys with which he opened the doors into the state apartments. He spoke first in German, then in French, then in English, and each time he received back the same surprise or the same laughter.

PART FIVE

"That is the bust of the Duke of Reichstadt, son of Napoleon, held prisoner in this palace throughout his life by Count Metternich. . . . That is the bed where Franz Josef died, notice the simple washstand and the wardrobe. . . . Here is the room where the Emperor Franz Ferdinand signed his abdication in 1918. . . . This is where Napoleon slept when he stayed in Vienna, that was his desk, and outside you can see his golden eagles on the gates. . . . And now we shall visit the most beautiful room of all, where the walls are covered with golden rose-wood beautifully worked."

The courtyards below were without commerce; there were only wandering democrats down there with their dreams, no horses or carriages. The stone pots were without flowers, the staircases were uncovered, there were no curtains on the windows, and the grates had long been filled in. But my eyes were hungry for all that had remained, for the ebony inlaid tables, for the chintz, the marble, the tapestries, the worn divans, the draped beds under their canopies of faded gold or rose, the secret panels, and, outside the windows, under the blaze of early afternoon, the lawn with turning paths sweeping up and up to a mile away.

Later I took a tram to Grinzing, where the high woods are, right above the heat of the city. From the top of the hill I could see the tall chimneys on the northern side of the Danube, amid haze. I walked farther into the woods and came upon a mansion falling into decay. With the chipped stonework, the

OF SINS AND WINTER

disused fairy-lights over the garden, the broken urns and statues near the balustrade, it was just as if those last battles had not a minute ago stalked away over the crest of the hill. The little ornamental garden was covered with grass and weeds, some of the windows were smashed, the awning was hanging in rags, the mosaic floor inside was cracked open, and behind these things lay the dark wood.

But I looked in at one of the windows. People were living there. I was surprised. There were clothes hanging up to dry, and I saw a child crawling on the floor.

All along the paths through the woods and the road from Grinzing up to Coblenz I saw many people strolling, families and children. And at last I feel easy among them. For the shame was on every one of us.

by ~~Rowdon~~ Rowdon THE CROWN

'~~One of the~~ the most novels I have ever read . . . An exquisite story
Nigel Nicolson

'A remarkably assured performance . . . Here is a fresh, vigorous
and altogether unusual talent' John O'London's Weekly

'It reveals more than a dash of originality and takes the reader to
the heart of an unbackneyed emotional situation' Birmingham Post

Cr 8vo 10s 6d

Edward Grierson

In this very human novel by the author of *Reputation for a Long*
the problems of wartime separation are presented in a particularly
ironic way. David Mitchelson, a lawyer attached to Army Head-
quarters in Baghdad, has the job of advising soldiers about their
marriage troubles. But his own marriage is threatened by the
stresses of prolonged separation, and he finds himself in a tense
situation where neither legal knowledge nor common sense is of
any help

Lge. Cr. 8vo 12s 6d

Peter Greave

The author contracted leprosy in India and lived as an outcast
now he is cured. He was spiritually down-and-out, but the
'second miracle' opened to him the faith and love of Christ. Here
is a triumphant and heartening book, the story of a man fighting
his way back through cynicism, self-pity and despair to his old
self-confidence and faith.

Lge. Cr. 8vo 12s 6d

Clutton & Co. Ltd.